

WORK OF THE PEOPLE FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION:
MOVING FROM WORSHIP CELEBRATION
TO WORSHIP SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

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The context of this project was Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, located in a neighborhood beset by various social ills, especially violence. This project examined how a church could move from worship celebration to having a transformative impact on the community. The hypothesis was that worship can offer a safe environment to address difficult concerns, build partnerships and become a source for finding solutions. A qualitative methodology was used including worship celebrations, news media, focus groups and individual interviews. The data demonstrated that intentional worship can foster hope and positively influence the despair that threatens neighborhoods.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my precious wife, Bridgette D. Young Ross, for appreciating me, keeping me spiritually faith filled and inviting me to live the kind of wonder making, love filled partnership that God made me to live.

I dedicate this project to the Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church whose obedience to God by way of staying in the city and living out the mission statement called me to this project.

Finally, I dedicate this project to my mother, the late Jo Aun Malithia Craig Ross whose faith I so admire and whom I miss so much because she knew my thoughts before I did and knew my feelings better than anyone; my grandmother, the late Truelove Jearlyn Ferguson Craig Thompson, my “Mama True” who loved, reared me and believed in me doggedly; my late Aunt, Margaret Cole Paupaw (Aunt Sparkey) who brought me much delight as we shared the joys and stresses of the darker hue; my children Alyssa, Bryant, and Kristina who gave me hope in this life and so much fun; and to my grandchildren, Jaylie and Christopher, who are brilliant and joys to my life.

ABBREVIATIONS

CDF	Children's Defense Fund
CETA	Comprehensive Employment and Training Act
GMUMC	Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church
JSUMC	John Steward United Methodist Church
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
PITS	Partners in the Struggle

INTRODUCTION

Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church (GMUMC) sits in the most impoverished zip code in Nashville, Tennessee. As a historic United Methodist Black Church, it was birthed in a post-slavery context, and for its entire history has remained in the same area of the city. As a congregation that was involved in the civil rights movement, it has a tradition of involvement for the betterment of others. GMUMC has a reputation for worship fervor. Its celebrations of worship have been noted to be vigorous, expressive and significant in the manner in which worshippers feel emotionally and spiritually moved.

Three murders for which GMUMC hosted death and resurrection worship services raised significant questions about how the church could continue and expand its transformative presence in the community: can worship lead a congregation to address violence in its community, especially violence perpetrated by Black men?; can worship empower a congregational ministry to offer transformative action beyond the sanctuary?; will liturgical fervor result in work that makes a difference in the community? This project examines how a local congregation can move from worship to ministry that begins the kinds of change that can make a community better.

The anticipated outcomes were that the local church, along with other entities, could partner to begin work that could make qualitative differences in the lives of people.

Church members and members of other organizations would be able to testify to distinct improvements in attitudes, emotions, and aspirations through the work spawned by worship that intended to make alterations in the community.

Chapter One, the “Ministry Focus,” reviews my spiritual autobiography, the ministry context of GMUMC and demonstrates the intersections that serve as the genesis of this project.

Chapter Two, “The State of the Art in this Ministry Model,” serves as a review of the relevant literature to this project's focus on worship for transformation. It addresses liturgy, the black church and the social conditions that lead to despair in communities such as the one where GMUMC serves.

In Chapter Three, “Theoretical Foundation,” the Biblical, Historical and Theological underpinnings of this project are discussed. The focus of these particularly pertains to disciples of Jesus moving from worship celebration to the worship service that transforms.

Chapter Four “Methodology,” contains the qualitative data collection methods used for the project. The research methods employed were these: worship celebrations; media outlets; interviews with individuals; focus groups.

Chapter Five, “Field Experience,” describes the project as methods of data collection were used and shows how these methods were analyzed and results.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, “Reflections, Summary and Conclusion” offers a synopsis of the project, the collected material and data collection. This chapter speaks to my personal understanding of how the project can help other congregations move from

liturgy and ritual—in whatever forms presented—to service that builds lives and brings hope in Jesus' name.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Spiritual Autobiography

Movement from sanctuary worship to lifestyle worship that makes life change shows up throughout my life. My mother, Jo Aun Craig and my father, Herschel Aloyne Ross, connected to bring me into the world on January 21, 1957. I received my name, Vance Philip Ross, from my mother and father's marriage, from my mother's desire to have twins named Vance and Vince and from Herschel's roommate Phillip Horton.

My mother felt estranged by the community, even church members, when she became pregnant with me. Segregated Bluefield, WV regarded my mother highly because she was smart, pretty and light skinned. The community loved her as a Bluefield State College graduate, Park Central High School graduate and a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Herschel was beloved as an intellectually astute college athlete from Braddock, Pennsylvania. The reverence for him remained; my mother lost standing after she became pregnant.

My parents divorced after about two years; thus, my mother and her mother, Truelove Jearlyn Ferguson Craig Thompson (Mama True), reared me—along with two brothers and a sister—in Bluefield from 1957-1967. In 1967 my mother left for New

York City with my brothers and sisters, allowing me to stay with my grandmother in Bluefield.

John Stewart United Methodist Church (JSUMC) was crucial to my development. Mama True began taking me to church at the age of eight, at the time determined when I could serve the church as an acolyte. Harry Coleman was the pastor during my acolyte ministry. He and Ms. Marie Marshall, one of the church mothers, were essential to my hearing the call to ordination. When I began the ministry as an acolyte, Ms. Marie began speaking into my life. Each Sunday she would give me a quarter and tell me that I was going to be a preacher. At the same time, I would watch the pastor preach and lead worship, knowing that I could do what he was doing but believing I could not because enjoyed laughter. I did not believe pastors laughed or had fun. I believed they were good people and that they did not get in trouble. I enjoyed laughing too much, liked to play too heartily and occasionally relished in mischief.

The Reverend Harry Coleman was the pastor when I stole grapes from a neighbor's grape arbor. When the owner discovered my friend and me in her yard—without her knowledge or permission—she called only my name, saying she would tell my grandmother and mother. Prior to being caught in the act, I had not thought this was stealing. I believed I was having fun and enjoying a tasty treat that was not mine and that I had not paid for. It was adventure, not thievery. When my mother found out, she talked about how inconsiderate it was to take grapes without permission. She reminded me that the wasting of grapes, the rotting of grapes was not my concern because they were not mine no matter how they were or were not wasted. I had a responsibility to request the grapes. Stealing was wrong and God was not pleased. I cried as my mother talked about

how God was hurt. She knew my heart more than anyone. I told her I was sorry and, through tears, said I am not worthy of serving as an acolyte anymore. The upcoming Sunday I was to serve but realized I was now exempted because of being a bad boy. My mother began to explain that I was still to do so. I moaned loudly, saying I cannot. God is mad with me and I am going to hell.

They got me dressed on Sunday, through tears and pleading. I sat in the pastor's study, where we always dressed for service and Pastor Coleman entered, he asked about the grapes. How did he know? I moaned and cried. I told the pastor I did not want to serve, I was not worthy of serving and that I knew I was now going to hell. Pastor Coleman helped me to stop crying so intensely. He then told me—for the first time that I can recall—about grace. He spoke about a love from God that always forgave. Through tears, I was stunned. I could not feel it. I could not believe it. Grace? God forgave thieves? Even worse? It was incredible to me but, as the idea began to marinate in my mind and heart, the idea slowed my tears. Crying off and on throughout the worship service, I did serve on that day.

A unique bond was forged between Pastor Coleman and because of this incident. That bond lasts to this day. Over the years, God used JSUMC to shape my community awareness and confidence. I became a regular public speaker as I made the offering each third Sunday, which was when the youth served as ushers and lifted the offering. I attended Women's Society for Christian Service and later United Methodist meetings with my grandmother. She took me to local meetings of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights era community meetings that either happened at JSUMC or were attended by JSUMC members. A life of

community impact and service—through the church—was my norm. My grandmother made sure I saw these things, was present around them and that I paid attention to them.

School was paradoxical for me. I performed well academically in the segregated schools. I enjoyed team sports and as a big child, I enjoyed athletics. However, I detested fighting. My mother called me her most gentle of six children. Of my siblings, I most feared fights and violence. I recall being scared, it seemed, all the time as a child. It seemed everyone could and would beat me up. Until as a third grader, a peer spoke ill of my mother. I fought him and won handily enough that I did not live in the same fear again. I maintained some hurdles relative to fear and fights. Some persons picked on and at me for years then, as an eighth grader, I had enough of one particular bully. I not only stood him down one before a crowd. He later confronted me one-on-one and I stood him down again. After that, I would fight almost anyone for the next two years! However, the fears and threats that no longer held me I knew held others. God put me in a place to quietly and individually commit myself to helping people not to live in the same kind of fear. I knew fear and hurt. I grew to want it to stop for others as it had for me.

After a woeful ninth grade academic year, I did well enough in high school and on the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test to receive inquiries from across the nation. My 24 American College Test score cemented many offers. I intended to matriculate at Marshall University until I received a hand written note from my former pastor, Harry A. Coleman who was then the appointed Associate Dean of the Chapel at West Virginia Wesleyan College. His letter invited me to consider attending Wesleyan. This small United Methodist College needed Black students, he wrote. More than that, there was a need for Black male students who were more than athletes. He said there was a need for

men who could read, write and think. He invited me to take on the challenge, the mantle that others had taken on before me, a mantle that would assist in building a better society and world. Honored and emboldened by this challenging invitation to think of more than myself, to participate in furthering the advancement of Black people in America, I accepted the challenge as my call and opportunity. I had no resources to afford application to apply to only one college and with a confidence that spoke more to naïve youth than to anything else, I made application only to West Virginia Wesleyan and was accepted there.

College at Wesleyan differed much from high school at Bluefield. Bluefield was a 20-30% Black town. It had a historically Black College, Black owned stores, Black churches, Black morticians and Black physicians. Albeit a small town, it had a social and cultural atmosphere distinct from Buckhannon. Wesleyan was still a profound experience in several ways. First of all, I walked on for the basketball team and made it. I only played one year as I received no money for this and the effort put in the team was akin to employment. Secondly, there was little or no expectation relative to academic excellence for athletes, especially Black men. While excellence in athletic prowess was anticipated, there was no expectation that the athletes would excel in class work. Many of the athletes were not assumed to do well in high school and this low expectation seemed to transfer to the college level. I was fascinated that the minds that made quick decisions on a basketball floor were not believed to be able, with more time, to do well in a classroom setting. Thirdly, leadership efforts were expected but often not taught. I saw that athletes were viewed as school representatives, as models for what the college was about; however, behaving as one to be emulated because of a community position as an athlete

was never discussed. Ball players were looked upon as public figures and expected to live up to the role; however what leaders do and how they do it was rarely if ever discussed. I noted that leadership from other venues could have and should have translated beyond the floor—especially if principles were taught. It just did not happen with Black men.

On the basketball team I realized the impact of John Stewart Church on me as a leader. I valued leading, the rights of all people and any underdog, the profound impact a system can have by expecting that Black men could not and would not think and the notion that I must be a thinker, must challenge biases and bigotry. I learned much in that year but, after illness and injuries, I realized I was not good enough nor interested enough to return as a basketball player. It was not easy at first but leaving the basketball life was a good decision. It allowed me to live a more connected collegiate life.

Wesleyan was the first place a woman other than my family members told me I was beautiful. It was simultaneously fascinating and hurtful that a White woman first said this to me; however, that was most noteworthy as God showed me that appreciation can come from surprising places. An intelligent woman who appreciated my mind, we had a good four-year romance. I met her in a conversation about the Autobiography of Malcolm X. In a predominantly White school, to find anyone to discuss Malcolm X was incredible. For the conversation to be intelligent and stimulating, moved me beyond belief. I could not wait to see her, to talk with her. She was a reader, well informed, sensitive and broad minded. She helped me want to be a good student.

In the first semester of my sophomore year, I made the Dean's List and found an amazing thing: in every class, each professor congratulated me on making the Dean's List. I had never noticed or heard that before. It was thrilling, humbling, and made my peers

take note of me as others who received the same remarks. I made the Dean's List three of my last four semesters. I was one of two junior year students inducted into Omicron Delta Kappa, a leadership honorary. God showed me that it was important to take the intellectual life much more seriously. Along with good grades—I served on Campus Community Boards, Vice President then President of the Black Student Coalition, representative to the student government assembly—I moved into an active campus life, always advocating for the underrepresented.

College life and engaging intellectual, social and romantic opportunities impressed me, even on the religious front. I attended chapel almost every Sunday during the first two years. However, the cursory and brief introduction to Karl Marx in Political Theory and to the idea of religion as opiate of the masses appealed to me. The church did not seem to do much. The resurrection story seemed to speak to an unfair and an unjust God at best, to a fantasy that people did not adhere to at worst. If God allowed God's son to be mistreated, no one else could expect to fare any better. Further, if people who claimed Jesus as their way to God could injure regularly in his name and rarely if ever see justice while most people dealt with evil systems that exploited their time and money each day, then the religion was only fantasy. It was of no use to real life. So it was that I left religion for most of the next four years. The life of the mind intrigued me some but the more than anything, the world of religion made no sense. I spent the last two years of college working at graduating. I lived in Detroit on a practicum experience and held a paying job for an internship my last semester. I graduated from Wesleyan earning the Bachelor of Arts Degree in the double major Youth Services and Government, with a 3.29 GPA. I left the paying internship and moved to Washington DC.

Here I found a new religion, the religion of the weekend. I learned here that Black women did find me appealing. Lacking in confidence in this area of life, I nonetheless experienced a tremendous boost as I enjoyed the wonder of being among urban professionals who flattered me with attention. I also had an amazing time in this atmosphere. In Washington, feminine beauty came in droves. Single females in search of companionship seemed never ending. I felt more appreciated and alive than at any time in my life. Romance was always important to me but I had not lived through much. In Bluefield I felt shunned. My introversion and shyness were factors but I felt the sting of color consciousness, the social malady from enslavement that held darker people as inferior to lighter skinned persons. Two single Black women raised me with little to no money. They nurtured me, cared for me and called me beautiful. Washington weekends affirmed that. Washington weekends were marvelous times.

Yet, one weekend night, I had an encounter of strange import. An inner conversation came to me in startling fashion; it seemed to come from nowhere. I questioned why I would spend weekends looking for women, seeking how to connect with them without a positive purpose beyond the fun of romance. I inquired of myself as to where my life was going and what it meant. It bothered me so much that for the next several weekends I did not go out, but went to bookstores or stayed home to reflect on what was wrong, what made me feel so strangely about only having fun, about enjoyment with no purpose. This time of intentional consideration led me to recall that I had no church in Washington, DC. I had not been to the place that so blessed my young life and, as such, felt I needed that place. I began searching and found the Petworth church just before a change of pastors.

As Petworth took on a new pastoral appointment, new pastor Ronald Ward, Sr., led United Methodism in ways I had not witnessed before. This celebrative, shouting and exuberant Methodism differed from what I had ever seen. Even as it excited and renewed my early call to ministry, I believed this an aberration. While I did not think United Methodists really behaved this way, I really liked it. Living in Washington, I could have attended Wesley Seminary to continue with Ward but a visit to Bluefield obliterated that idea. John Stewart also had a newly appointed pastor, Dr. Frank L. Horton. Also an exuberant and celebrative leader, He was adamant: I had to go to Gammon Theological Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center. The reason was “to learn to deal with Black people.” Loving Washington, DC, but prepared for a new adventure, I moved to Atlanta.

Looking back, I think I was now tired of single life and wanted to settle down. I first met Pam Hicks at 1974 and 1975 student council camps. She impressed me especially relative to one particular incident. I needed to confront some adults about an allegation that insulted me. Pam went with me for the confrontation and she agreed to stand with me. To me, that spoke highly of her intelligence and her character. I had not spoken with her in years but found her number and called. She had been married, divorced and had a three year old child. As I had been born out of wedlock and my mother had been a single mother for most of my life, I found it unfair to eliminate her from consideration as a mate because she had a child. I began a long distance courtship and married Pam 18 months later. She and daughter Kristina moved to Atlanta to be with me. I later adopted Kristina.

I loved Gammon Seminary and the Interdenominational Theological Seminary (Gammon/ITC). It was a compelling journey. I learned of Methodism's enthusiastic beginnings, about the critical importance of attractive worship and inspired, "in-spirited" preaching. The learning of theologies, especially liberated and liberating theologies buoyed my confidence and call. I was sure God called me. I was certain that the call was to teach and to preach, to give confidence and hope because my life was one blessed by the encouragement of the faith. It was by no means easy. The workload was exhausting. With a wife and child, it was a challenge. Seminary was rewarding. It was here that I came to focus on my call text: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19). The connection Jesus makes here to the disadvantaged and disinherited, the liberating nature of these verses propelled me to try my best. As such, I graduated with honors, won two preaching awards and an Old Testament award. I served a local church appointment that consisted of four churches in my final year, receiving \$600.00 extra dollars per month by doing so. One of the churches had the challenge of deciding whose names would be found on a cornerstone after construction of a new wing. A long-standing family feud played out, unbeknownst to me, through a vote on which names would be placed on the cornerstone. The church spilt, feelings were hurt and many promised never to be in the same church again over letters in a building cornerstone! This trivial but anguishing moment showed me how inconsiderate, evil and horrible religion could show itself to be. It was a lesson I would encounter over and over again as a pastor.

Graduation found me appointed to the Trinity Bentons Ferry Charge in Fairmont, WV, father to a new daughter (Alyssa Renee) and landing in the city where my wife of two years had attended college. The churches were two: one White and the other Black. The White church was rural and, as much as this was possible in Fairmont, WV, the Black church was urban.

I yet began this leg of the pastoral journey with much hope. I found that the young men on the corners and playgrounds were not evangelized and had no connection to church. I became a playground basketball fixture, trying to build relationships with these men who demonstrated promise but did not seem ready to meet the future with hope. Some of these ball players began attending church. They brought new energy and new possibilities to this church. However, in my pastoral year fifth year there came a moment that there were not enough ball players to play because—in this small town—drug raids caused arrests that found many of the playground guys in jail. I see now that God was showing something about Black men and the economy.

Bishop William Boyd Grove then appointed me to the Simpson Memorial Church in Charleston WV, the anchor United Methodist Black church in the conference. This church grew from 90 to 130 in worship over four years. From no Sunday school it grew to five classes, the largest of which was the youth class. Outreach ministry grew by way of receiving the largest Black Girl Scout troop in the state and beginning the only Black Cub Scout troop in the county. While these things happened, somehow God moved on the church to find a connection to homeless men. We came to notice that homeless persons hung around the church. So, attempting to reach them, we served a meal and we had worship every other Friday. In the six months prior to my leaving this grew to about

25 people. Most of our un-housed neighbors attending this meal were men. These men were unemployed or woefully under-employed. God was showing me—again—an issue that would be addressed.

Family needs and a ministry opportunity that I could not imagine caused me move to Nashville to the General Board of Discipleship. There I learned the essential nature of mission and vision for any ministry and that my instincts were not wrong. The church should be reaching out to impact its community and should do so systemically. I got the chance to use this knowledge when, in February of 1998 Bishop Felton Edwin May invited me to serve the First United Methodist Church of Hyattsville, MD, a congregation that expressed a multicultural mission. It was a vocational dream. The church moved from 337 in worship to 484 over 5.5 years. Bible study classes grew from one to fourteen. Interns came to church at a number of one upon my arrival to six. The Shalom School Afterschool for the Arts ministry connected us to community and enabled us to partner with a community investor for a second campus, in a Latino neighborhood. God allowed us to engage poor people in ways that would educate children and move them to better performance in schools. God again showed me the central place of economics in neighborhoods. As First Church gained a strong reputation across the conference, the region and across the connection, I became certain that God had blessed me to grow disciples and congregations and to see the critical nature to connecting the church's mission to the neighborhood.

For family reasons we returned to Nashville and the General Board Of Discipleship (GBOD) where I served until I took the Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church (GMUMC) appointment. I was called, separately by two influential friends, and

asked to apply for the position, GBOD Associate General Secretary. In that post I watched as the scene for the connectional church and the local church wrestled with swift and marked change. Economic disparity dominated the landscape. Technological changes ensued so rapidly as to make the cassette archaic and the compact disc at least outdated if not obsolete. This found me serving as one of several volunteer United Methodist elders at the Hobson church that spoke primarily to people on the margins of society. It was at this point that I saw even more clearly that church connection to the neighborhood that needed to be addressed. I had no idea that I would soon be challenged to encounter this need.

After seven appointive seasons at GBOD, I was appointed to serve as the pastor of the GMUMC in Nashville. This 1100 member church experienced some challenges with the sudden loss of its former pastor but after interim work by Bishop William Morris, I was appointed in June of 2011. I began with my first sermons on July 10. In my first celebrations of worship, a person walked the aisle to give her life to Jesus and to join in the ministry of GMUMC. I joined the congregation in believing that this evangelistic ministry would be the hallmark of my work there. In fact, I was sure this might be a part of my doctoral project. However, the very next day, Clarence Claybrooks was murdered and two days later, I was asked to open the Gordon sanctuary for his funeral service.

Context Analysis

GMUMC has a storied history. Connected to historical events in Nashville, offering the Tennessee Conference much in pastoral leadership and innovation, glorying in the culture of its people and its neighborhood as well as ministering across each level

of the church, Gordon has been an exemplary congregation. Recent years have known financial challenges, personnel controversy and congregational anguish. Through it all, it is a context ripe with possibility and hope. Gordon Memorial church is the largest United Methodist Black Church in the state of Tennessee. Founded in 1876, the church met in the home of John and Belle Rouse for nine years. Gradual growth necessitated a larger venue. Meeting in Gordon's Hall (a place located where Meharry Medical College now stands), the men and women who decided to raise money to for a "church lot." This place was a brush arbor.¹

Dave Gordon was appointed as first pastor of GMUMC at around 1876. The first frame church building was named Gordon Chapel Methodist Church in his honor. The present congregational ethos connects intimately with these humble beginnings. The enthusiastic worship, the down home family culture, the connection to Meharry neighborhood all correspond to the history. GMUMC is a neighborhood church. Most of the members are connected to the neighborhood and even as many have moved far away, a considerable number of folk live nearby. This neighborhood could connect well to a Black aristocracy. The building that housed Pearl High School is less than two miles from Gordon. It was a local education center, noted for the arts and athletic teams. Professional athletes such as "Jefferson Street" Joe Gilliam, and NBA veteran Ted McClain graduated from Pearl. Musically, Marion Moore, an opera star of the 1960s, graduated from Pearl, as did Milton Turner, a jazz drummer who played with Ray

¹ William C. Bowen, "A Brief History of Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church," *Homecoming Souvenir Booklet*, September 8, 2013.

Charles, trumpeter Joe Davis who played with James Brown and Charles Dungey, who played in Duke Ellington's band.

In addition to athletic and musical distinctions, Pearl High School maintained close ties to the Civil Rights movement in Nashville. Much of that had to do with the proximity to two of the colleges that were central to the student activities, Fisk University and Tennessee A&I State College (now known as Tennessee State University). Fisk, sitting one half mile from Gordon, is the Alma Mater of W.E.B. DuBois, arguably the greatest social science scholar in American history. DuBois was a founder of the NAACP, editor of its signature periodical called *The Crisis*, a prolific writer and researcher and lived out his final critique of American racism through expatriation to Ghana. Fisk remains a citadel for critical thought and academic excellence in Nashville and the national Black populace. Tennessee State has continued to be a focal point for Nashville, its social scene and its academic pursuits. As a public institution, it costs much less than Fisk and the other private institutions in the area. Further, it maintains a vocal and present alumnus, many of whom attend Gordon church. Their vociferous advocacy for the integrity of the school's origins and impact make it a central influence on the metropolitan area around Gordon.

Not only has Gordon advocated for these institutions, but especially under the pastorate of Dogan Williams (1967-1981) the church was a leader on the civil rights front. Williams encouraged the church to step forward in the desegregation of the United Methodist Church as well as the Nashville area. Pastors Elijah McGee, Donald Jenkins, Paul Perkins, Clarence Smith, Daniel M. Hayes, Sr. and William Morris (retired bishop and interim pastor) maintained this community involvement over the following years.

The McGee years are known as peak years for ministry and evangelism. Under Pastor McGee, the church filled to capacity and was staffed with two other pastors. Pastor Jenkins stayed three years and was instrumental in developing church expansion plans as well as the church mission statement. His vision began to be implemented years later. Pastor Perkins stayed one year and was known as a fine preacher. With a strong team of laity, Smith moved the church to begin building expansion. A fine singer and instrumentalist, Smith touched the hearts of people and helped them to begin construction plans before illness forced retirement. Daniel Hayes followed Smith. He came to the church in 1999. His evangelistic fervor as a preacher, his young family, and his experience in leading building campaigns proved crucial in finished the first two phases of construction.

None of this was done with a country club crowd. This is a middle class church of hard workers. Many of Gordon's hard workers are government employees: public school teachers, post office employees, public works officers and the like. However, there are more entrepreneurs than one might expect. Realtors, musicians, barbers, beauticians, physicians, chefs/cooks, vendors, contractors, consultants, engineers, dry cleaners, all attend the church. Small business ownership, working for one's self and making jobs rather than simply looking for a job, prevails as a Gordon mindset. These workers and business owners grew up in the Gordon neighborhood, most live in other neighborhoods now. After being educated and joining the work force they were financially able to move. The impact of this seems dramatic. In this zip code area (37208) the 2011 median income

was \$22,679² while the median income for Nashville was \$43,399.³ For Tennessee, the median income was \$42,764. The population of the 37208 ZIP Code in 2011 was primarily African American with a median age of 33.7 years.⁴

While it is true that many left the neighborhood for more prosperous areas, there is another and connected reality. The church has many persons who are forty-year members. These persons have, in the main, been tremendously supportive of the church while living in the community. These chose to stay believing that this was and is their home no matter what the problems. They work tirelessly, give generously and attend constantly. Yet, this also remains a transient higher education community. The students come from across the state and nation. The connections to the community are much more incidental than neighborly; that is to say, these young people go to and from campus events. Campus communities seem fairly insular, only slightly connecting to the community on physical grounds other than their own. GMUMC differs in that it relates to the 37208 zip code by family histories and to the college campuses as alumni. As such it owns a distinct reputation from the other United Methodist congregations in the city. Gordon has fed homeless men and women for many years. Once called “Love In Action” the ministry is now called “Hands of Hope,” a time of ministry with un-housed neighbors. The church has long offered food from a food pantry, hosted neighborhood health fairs,

² 37208 Zip Code Detailed Profile, City-data.com, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://www.city-data.com/zip/37208.html>.

³ Nashville-Davidson, Tennessee, City-data.com, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Nashville-Davidson-Tennessee.html>.

⁴ 37208 Zip Code, City-data.com.

aided students with scholarships and offered utility assistance to the needy persons. Gordon connects to this community by ministry.

These are also people with whom Gordon celebrates. The neighborhood and Gordon together attend TSU football games with Gordon, go to neighborhood bars, frequent the same neighborhood barbershops and beauty salons. They go to the same card parties, share baby sitters, attend the same high school reunions, social organizations and concerts. Gordon and this community are inseparable in many ways. This social and cultural connection causes familiarity that can also be negative. The recent loss of a long time pastor is a case in point. This pastor grew up in the church. He wanted to pastor his home church and the home church wanted their “child” to come home. He knew the church, the community and culture. There was a familiarity unusual in most United Methodist charges. He knew the people, secrets, strengths and challenges. The informality and ease of movement made for some allegations of behavior that may have been part of the culture but became less welcoming of pastoral participation.

Worship celebrations at Gordon clearly connect to the context. These are not United Methodists who happen to be Black. These are Black people who happen to be United Methodists. The music and instrumentation of Saturday night is most relevant to Sunday morning. Gospel music, rooted in the instrumentation of jazz music, Spirituals, rhythm and blues, neo soul and hip hop can be found on any given Sunday. Having church involves music and sermonic discourse that involve the congregation demonstrably. There is no apology for an emotional, Spirit led and Spirit fed experience. The expectation is that persons will be spiritually and emotionally moved, not merely intellectually convinced.

The church mission statement says: “The mission of Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church is to make disciples for Christ, to know Him, share Him and be witnesses for Him in and beyond our community.” This is a statement of expectation, implying that following Jesus changes communities, lives, homes and futures. The culture of the church is Black language; there is no worship attempt to extract Blackness in order to appease Euro-American tastes. While the order of worship does contain several elements from middle class Euro-American United Methodism, Gordon puts its own imprint on the experience. So it is that in classic Black church vocabulary, Gordon expects not merely to go to church. God expects to have church, to experience divine power and presence such that God’s movement among the people makes change.

Gordon engages in liberation theology. This is not in the political sense that so often is a misunderstanding of this genre of theological discourse. Liberation is both personal and political. It is individual as well as cultural. Gordon historically owned a theology that expected healing from physical, emotional and mental disease. In Jesus, God mended homes and households. This congregation participated in a movement of God that changed the social, governmental, economic and political landscape. This theological language, at its best, is the language of the worship experience and Bible Study, of prayer meetings and ministries of outreach.

There is also a context that finds the liberation conversation and theological stance a bit disconcerting. There is a significant group of people who find no comfort in spirituality that stands outside of or in contradiction to position has long been viewed as the Word of God. This opinion suggests that to be spiritual is to be other than political. There is the sense that to speak civically is to speak outside of who Christians should be.

God calls us to be spiritual almost exclusively. It is, especially as relates to governance, to behave in ways that limit tension and seek not to cause conflict. This causes some theological and spiritual conflict in the life of the church. It is viewed as less than helpful. Some have left the local church as liberation has been used as a hermeneutic. Others have stayed but are at best spectators, at worst persons who move in and out of worship and ministry efforts, making negative comments as they do so. It is in this context that the church finds itself wrestling in ministry. Even with this theological tension, the congregation yet tries to relieve suffering in Jesus' name. It continues ministries of mercy while it wrestles in some quarters with a ministry that critiques and challenges systemic subjugation of others.

There is also a struggle within that this local church must confront. There remains much pain that the church went through in the 2010 loss of a homegrown pastor. While this is not the subject of this work, it is important to note that the wounds of GMUMC, as it seeks to be a source of healing, can become a hindrance when ignored or denied. There is pain here that must be faced and cured as the church seeks wholeness for itself and for those with whom it ministers. In and through all of this the church maintains a connection to the global church. Until recently and based on its mortgage payments (approximately 40% of income), this church has prided itself in participating in World Service giving and Annual Conference apportionments. Gordon attended the opening of Africa University with its choir featured as in the ministry of music. A Gordon laywoman, Angella Current Felder, is the historian of the university whose text about Africa University released in 2013. The sense that the violence described in larger cities across the nation is part and parcel of this town and neighborhood is not lost on the congregation. They see their

ministry extending to the larger community, city and world. GMUMC can anticipate becoming a Congregational Resource Center of the Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century (SBC21) Initiative. There is also the intent to reach across racial, ethnic and cultural lines. Having recently been joined by four whites and having received over 150 persons into membership in the past 36 months, the church fully expects to be a model of what an Acts 2 church looks like. Presently the church is constructing a discipleship system, experimenting with new worship ideas and inviting members to address God's call on their lives. As this is done, the community and global aspects of the ministry will expand. Gordon is a church with immense potential. This church can be used by God to begin new churches, revive sinking churches and to send more persons, clergy and lay, into vital ministry. Crucial to this is the church's engagement of the community. This engagement calls for worship celebrations that enlighten and motivate disciples of Jesus towards the kinds of worship-filled lives that move the local church to a profound community relevance. Such relevance assures that the people of God are building towards positive community change. With this movement and commitment to positive change in God, along with a commitment to one another, the growth potential for the congregation becomes expansive. Such a commitment will find GMUMC continuing to serve God relevant and empowering body of believers, serving the Kingdom of God in Nashville.

Synergy

Worship celebrations that become worship service do so because they address pivotal concerns in the community. By worship service means transformative action done

by the power of God and giving honor to the Kingdom vision of people liberated to choose to live in the fullness of God. These critical issues connect the ministry of the church in life giving ways with the needs of the neighborhood. Thom Rainer discusses vision as part of a three-part intersection called the Vision Intersection Profile. This includes first of all, the passions of the leadership. What does the spiritual leadership desire because of God's call, their experiences, and their commitments? Secondly, the profile includes the passions, gifts and talents of the congregation. What do the baptized do well? What are the calls and gifts of the local church? Finally, the profile includes needs of the community. What is God calling for by way of the needs and the issues found in the community?⁵ This is a call for the church, pastoral leadership and their inclinations to interact in Kingdom building fashion. Witnessing and recognizing these intersections becomes essential to the work of the church in mission.

My call to ministry based in Luke 4:18-19 connects very much with the context. By growing up in segregated Bluefield—knowing poverty personally and knowing many who struggled economically, politically, socially and spiritually—this work connects much to my call and gifts. I connect to the disinherited and the neighborhood surrounding GMUMC is very much this kind of environment. GMUMC decided to remain in the 37208 zip code. The worship flavor and feel is exuberant, enthusiastic and energetic. The church chose not to leave and not to change its style. The members have evolved in terms of education and economics. Many of the members once lived in walking distance of the edifice. While most attendees drive in to church, they are aware of what it means to be in that neighborhood. It was once a place where standards and dreams were very

⁵ Thom Rainer, *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2005), 113-114.

different. There are many who have known unkindness because of the accident—or rather the providence—of birth. Situated in the poorest zip code in Nashville, GMUMC is surrounded by the disadvantaged, by people who have been mistreated for what others view as mistakes, as ignorance or as a lack of suitable position in life. Race, economics and the adverse cultural perceptions judgment heaped upon the disadvantaged is seen here. This connects with my experience in that my mother, with a degree from an accredited college, conceived me out of wedlock. She became nobody in many eyes. She could find no employer for the first six years of my life. By virtue of de jure segregation, this was necessarily an economically disadvantaged locale in my hometown. Race, economics and perceptions found my family disadvantaged. Race, economics and perceptions of the people and community around GMUMC impact this call to ministry.

GMUMC and its importance during the Nashville civil rights movement is a place of intersection. Rip Patton and Joy Leonard, GMUMC members, were two of the Freedom Riders trained by James Lawson in the tenets and practice of non-violence. Several of the tactical and strategic meetings of the Nashville movement were hosted at GMUMC. The people were not all involved but the congregation was known for having welcomed movement leaders, students and others. In the same way, John Stewart Church where I grew up was a congregation involved in the civil rights movement. C. Anderson Davis was the pastor of John Stewart until the mid-nineteen-sixties and served as the West Virginia President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. My grandmother served as West Virginia Youth Coordinator of the NAACP. I often attended meetings of the NAACP with her. At times these meetings were held in our home. This impacted my sense of calling and of church. I was reared in a local

church that was involved in the community and its fight for justice. The connection of community activism found at GMUMC and in my history is an essential intersection for the belief that worship celebration can impact worship service.

GMUMC is a Tennessee State Church. That is to say, it has a membership that committed itself to this institution. They attend football games, scholarship events and educational options. Gordon pledges itself to the institution and its commitment to students. John Stewart Church of Bluefield was similar. All the young women and men at John Stewart were expected to attend college. The church helped to set a climate, an expectation that youth would esteem higher education. Although they rarely gave funds as a congregation, specific members would offer spending money to students. It was not out of the ordinary for a student to receive encouragement cards. Often the cards had a small amount of cash or a check. Others would send care packages, boxes with goodies and snacks that also offered and encouraging word. The encouragement and uplift from these things was most important to the growth and development of many students. West Virginia Wesleyan, Marshall University and Bluefield State College were the John Stewart schools while GMUMC, although a TSU church, also encouraged students at Meharry Medical College and Fisk University. Worship celebration that encourages worship service finds education as a critical component; education alters life in positive ways and God's church can be essential to this.

GMUMC shares a deep love of its heritage. After 138 years of service, years that began in a literal brush harbor. The singing and worship remain entrenched in the Black worship traditions. The ministry both within and without the congregation honors and respects their particular traditions and customs. By so doing, there is a sense of free

spiritual agency, of theological and cultural courage that said that while yet a part of a larger body called Methodists then United Methodists, GMUMC insisted and persisted in being free to meet its congregants and its community on terms that respected and honored the honesty and humanity of Blackness in the Wesleyan tradition. John Stewart had a more bourgeois worship tradition; nonetheless, that church also took much pride in its heritage and history. The singing and worship that they enjoyed—a Black history often and tragically not considered Black—persists as its heritage. This persistence is essential to this project, not as much in the way worship happens but in the reasons those traditions are revered. In both instances the churches move to be proud of their ancestors, of the customs handed down and out of that pride they ministered to address the community. This pride is essential now. The worship in this project seeks to replicate a pride of lineage and a nobility of traditions that can continue mission work beyond the walls of the edifice and the boundaries made by mindsets. Such worship seeks to inform, inspire and embolden towards transformational service.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATE OF THE ART IN THIS MINISTRY MODEL

Brent D. Peterson

In *Created to Worship*, Brent Peterson discusses the act of communal worship in an essential fashion relative to what it does for people and how that venerates God. He writes that Christian worship honors God and renews humankind. It offers a necessary esteeming of the Creator and it enhances the human creature. Peterson states that “Christian communal worship is the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity as a divine-human event where God offers transformation and healing to help people become more fully what God created them to be and do.”¹ Worship demonstrates how humanity values God. Simultaneously, it serves as a means of grace for perfecting humanity, for making people better. Worship does this by helping people to live into the full humanity God intended at creation. Understanding humanity to be made fully in the image of God, Peterson offers that worship perfects worshippers as they come to love God, to love each other, to love creation and to love themselves. This love brings them to all that God wants for them. It heals and restores them to the aim God has for them.

¹ Brent D. Peterson, *Created to Worship: God’s Invitation to Become Fully Human* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 11.

This healing is not simply an ending of injury and illness. Worship does more than relieve from discomfort and rectify damages. It is wholeness towards divine meaning and purpose. It makes worshippers better so that they can live better, be better to do better. Discussing worship as the primary reason God created all things, Peterson says that healing comes by way of the encounter with divinity through belonging to the body of Christ, the church. This healing is from the disease and injury of sin. Sin, for Peterson, is the choice to move away from God, to be and to do other than what God wishes for humanity.² Humans in sin, a spiritual illness, fail to recognize or remember how good health looks and feels. The choices and habits of turning from God become routine and thus harmful. Ignoring the opportunity to do as God desires, humans often opt for something else. This option diminishes their humanity, the fullness meant for them by God. It is worship that restores this humanity. God wants humans to get beyond the hurt of sin to the health of divine love. Peterson writes:

Hence, through worship, God continues to make us more fully human by offering healing and forgiveness. When our lives are fixated on God, and God's love flows through us, we can better reflect God's glory back to God and to our fellow creatures and ourselves. When reflecting God's glory in loving relationships, we then become what God meant for us to be, caught up in the very love of the triune God. Humans were created so that love might flourish all for the glory of God. Thus, we receive the gift of life by worshipping God, and in that worship we love ourselves, love our fellow creatures and are loved rightly.³

This worship that heals worshippers, positioning them to become obedient friends and servants of God, speaks directly to this project. Peterson's discussion of worship means that a love professed and confessed in worship shows itself in encounters with

² Peterson, 33.

³ Ibid., 34-35.

those who are beleaguered by sin on personal and systemic levels. Those who worship God in Jesus are invited into a love that is an acknowledged commitment and demonstrated lifestyle. Because love has been shown and showered in corporate worship, it lives beyond the worship event. Because humans are created to worship, when that commitment restores them, their worship shows up in everything they do and in every place they are found. Such worship is more than what they do. It is who they are. This project calls forth a worship that does healing activity because it finds healing and is committed to healing in the worship experience.

This healing finds deeper nourishment in the service of the Word and proclamation. Peterson says the Word is scripture but it is more. Scripture gives humanity revelation into the identity of God and, by so doing, gives access to the healing from sin that allows full humanity to blossom. The Word of Scripture introduces and invites encounter with the eternal Word, Jesus Christ. This encounter initiated by God invites human response to the revelation. God allows the people to know and note the Word is Jesus Christ. God's revelation expects to elicit a reply, a response from those who experience the Word. Peterson says, "[T]he service of the Word offers some distinct rhythms that guide the ordo. The basic structure of the service of the Word is God's call and creation's response empowered by the Spirit."⁴ In God's call, the presentation of God's written word as Scripture and the announcement of God's specific word homiletically combine to reveal God's expectation and declaration for the particular context in which they occur. God speaks currently—revealing God's claims, expectations and wisdom for the gathered community—offering reinvigoration for the moment and

⁴ Peterson, 100.

inspiration for the future. Peterson writes, “Both the reading of the Scripture and the proclamation of the Word move the congregation to realize the ways in which God has brought healing while also recognizing that more healing is needed.”⁵ Scripture and sermon merge to give hope in the present moment but, more than that, also to realize that there needs to be hope beyond this moment. There must be a change of living now and in days to come. The call of God’s Word comes to state what is needed now and beyond now, to make better and to commit to a better future.

This healing that enables fuller worship of God calls forth a response from the worshippers. The worshippers cannot be neutral after encountering God’s Word. They are obligated to work for the cause of God in Christ. Peterson says that “Hence, the liturgy, the Work of One (Christ) for the sake of the many who become the work of Christ, hopes to move beyond duty to thanksgiving and love.”⁶ The fitting response to God’s Word is a gratitude and affection that commits to God’s mission in Christ and God’s specific revelation. This is essential to the project because it is from God’s love filled, action-calling Word that labor towards healing begins to take place. Worship celebration becomes worship service as worshippers listen for and reply to the Word of God.

Peterson further addresses the healing that worship brings through his discussion of the sacrament of Holy Communion. For Peterson, it is through the sacrament that the church is revived as Jesus’ body, sent into a broken and sin sick world as agents of transformation and empowerment. He writes, “At the table, the church is renewed as the

⁵ Peterson, 108.

⁶ Ibid., 110.

body of Christ and is sent out to be Christ's broken body and shed bleed in the world."⁷

Fellowship at the Lord's Table brings followers of Jesus the spiritual strength to go beyond the walls of the church, representing the curative capacity the world needs to overcome the disease of sin. This empowerment comes in the very presence of Jesus Christ at the table. Peterson discusses this (it will be addressed later in this project) as doxological agnosticism. This mysterious attendance of Christ at this earth bound but heavenly banquet, with the church, finds the gathered church nourished by the Eucharist so that it may then be sent into the world. The church is not sent to individuals. The church is sent to the world to bring health and wholeness. This is indispensable to this project in that table fellowship is critical to seeing the hurt in the community and being nourished in hope for the community. The violence that threatens and harms must have an antidote. That antidote comes, in the words of Tom Dozeman, in the shed blood of Jesus, which offers itself as the antiviral that overcomes sin and renews, even sustains life.⁸

This text undergirds the movement from worship celebration to transformative action in that it addresses God's healing of people and situations in days past, but also in days to come. It reminds us that the veneration of God is not the practice of ritual for tradition's sake, nor even for a mysterious or magical movement of supernatural relief. Instead, God calls, in Word and Table, for worshippers to be empowered and emboldened as change agents. Healing of persons and situations happens as disciples of Jesus, nourished by the Eucharist, move into the world strengthened to be difference makers.

⁷ Peterson, 176.

⁸ Tom Dozeman, "Holiness and Idolatry for Ministry" (presentation for Doctor of Ministry Intensive Seminar, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH, August 19, 2014).

Gregory Ellison

Gregory Ellison, in *Cut Dead but Still Alive* serves as a source of theological assessment for the reality of this project. In this pastoral care examination of ways to care for young Black men, Ellison offers insight into the complexities of this violence and distress that this project undertakes. Ellison confronts the susceptibility of young Black men to invisibility, to being dismissed and denied by the society at large. He maintains that for many young Black men the violence of the society's view of them—and all that this implies—attacks their futures, especially closing off their senses of control, self-esteem, of meaningful existence and belonging.⁹

Cut Dead is language from the 19th century that means to be overlooked intentionally, to be completely and absolutely disregarded. He conveys that to be unnoticed on a continuous basis, to be treated in life as if nonexistent, brings a profound despair. It is a repeated and seemingly a never-ending torture, one that has devastating results.¹⁰ Ellison expresses how it is that societal acknowledgement endorses and sanctions beneficial sensibilities for healthy and wholesome progression. Concomitantly, the lack of social recognition discards persons and prevents health of mind and spirit.

One who is cut dead is one who is a non-person, neither a relic nor a remnant, because relics and remnants connect to something of value and purpose. They are at least reminders that they were once attached to an important moment or entity. The one who has been cut dead is no value precisely because their very presence is not identified. To

⁹ Gregory C. Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), xii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

be cut dead is to not be seen, or heard, touched or acknowledged. It is, in effect, to exist and yet to be known and understood as nonexistent. It is to be nothing and nobody.

Human beings have four fundamental needs that Ellison culls from the work of Kipling D. Williams. These needs are belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence.¹¹ Belonging is about having steady interface with others in an essentially secure environment. Self-esteem means to have a positive sense as an individual because of one's encounters with others. It is about feeling personal worth because that value is reflected in positive encounters with others. Control comes in a certainty of agency, the idea that one can indeed alter circumstances. One who is cut dead, who experiences life as a non-person, has little to know source for experiencing the competence of agency or even the knack of agency. All these conspire to delete much if any sense of meaningful existence. To be cut dead is to live in and with the pain of not knowing if life matters. It places one in the disorientation and incomprehension of living. A person becomes lost in the questions, on a conscious and/or unconscious level: 1. Why am I here and 2. Would life be worse if I were not?

This work is important to this project as it sets a framework out of which to begin to understand the sources and origins of the violence that besets many young Black men in North Nashville. Poverty and inadequate education cause appalling conditions among these men. The economic impact devastates; however, within the overwhelming distresses discovered in these, there is equally and perhaps even more destructive concern relative to the human connections. Ellison helps to see that the lack of positive and godly mentors and peers places these men in the position to choose to live as social junk or

¹¹ Ellison, 22.

social dynamite. When one lacks self-worth, it becomes easy to live as social junk, to choose simply to give up, to give in and to surrender to the despair of being a nobody. The alternative to this is to become social dynamite, to rebel at being viewed as nothing and nobody and because of being hurt, to choose to pass that hurt around. To be social junk, is to accept the invisibility that is given. To be social dynamite is to reject that invisibility but more—it is to make oneself seen even as the consequences devastate.¹²

Ellison's work is crucial to this project through its insight around scarcity and hiddenness found among young Black men. When persons live in poverty and are also ignored as irrelevant, rage or surrender are the fundamental results. Such results offer devastating consequences if no alternative can be substituted. The project seeks to recognize the challenges of being viewed as junk or dynamite and to respond such that the healing of Jesus can be manifested in lives for a long term good.

Reza Aslan

In *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, Reza Aslan discusses a religious faith built on a brutal reality that oft times is not discussed or even mentioned in churches: Jesus came to earth in a vile, violent, oppressive and domineering context. Aslan discusses the oppressive Roman Empire as the context for the life and death of Jesus. Also discussed is the life of Jesus and the gospels in light of the tyranny that dominated that era. He not only reports on the despotism of the time period, he challenges the literary silence about oppression found in the gospels. He points us to, “Three rebels on a hill covered in crosses, each cross bearing the racked and bloodied

¹² Ellison, 14.

body of a man who dared defy the will of Rome. That image alone should cast doubt upon the gospels portrayal of Jesus as a man of unconditional peace almost wholly insulated from the political upheavals of his time.”¹³ For Aslan, the physically disengaged and paranormal savior often taught about in religious venues stands in opposition to the Jesus he reads about in the canonical gospels and whom he examined in critical study.

This notion connects with this project in that the violence demonstrated too often in the North Nashville community can be traced to a systemic oppression that dominates in direct and indirect ways. In many inner city blocks, public housing developments and lower income settings, the subjugation of poverty is palpable. Businesses, effective transportation, valued and well-funded education and jobs with livable wages are erratic and spasmodic. This kind of environment breeds survivalist economy, making a living by any means necessary. What appears as only criminal behavior is the rebellious response to an uncontrollable environment, a situation in life that, without hope, discourages and even disallows peaceful coexistence. The rebellious nature that Aslan describes in the days of Jesus is found in the context of this project but, the lack of education relative to their plight, and the lack proximity to their oppressors disallows an intended seditious response to authority. Instead the rebellion becomes a fight for commercial survival, which often results in abuse of one another rather than dismantling of the repressive system.

Aslan sees that in the times of Jesus as well. He speaks of the cleansing of a leper as an illustration of this economic exploitation. He finds Jesus showing rebellion against

¹³ Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), xxviii-xxix.

Rome and against Rome's pawns; in effect, it is the fight for monetary existence among the oppressed. He writes,

The leper is not just ill, after all. He is impure. He is ceremoniously unclean and unworthy of entering the temple of God. His illness contaminates the entire community. According to the law of Moses to which Jesus refers, the only way for a leper to be cleansed is to complete the most laborious and costly ritual, one that could be conducted solely by a priest. First, the leper must bring the priest two clean birds, along with some cedarwood, crimson yarn and hyssop . . . (Jesus) is telling him (the leper) to present himself to the priest having already been cleansed . . . Jesus did not only heal the leper, he purified him, making him eligible to appear as a true Israelite. And he did so for free, as a gift from God. . . .¹⁴

While this is a religious economic abuse, that is not all. Aslan exposes the oppressed people—of whom Jesus was a part—mistreating those of their sisters and brothers suffering the same misuse. This is an example of a group of people turning on themselves economically. The lepers, the most powerless and vulnerable in the community, are viewed as prey for those who are strong enough to live as predators among them. These predators are an essential part of the system that has been built to maintain order by rewarding those who “keep the gate.” Aslan presents the power cruel systems have to get the tormented to afflict others.

This project finds underpinning from Aslan as his analysis of the life of Jesus parallels this era. Processes and systems from the over-culture keep persons in oppressed situations. The lack of a strong education system that values disregarded people, as well as the absence of ways to make a livable wage, sets the stage for persons to turn on each other rather than to each other. Aslan reveals Jesus as an uncommon Nazarene Jew whose understanding of and connection to the God of his ancestors caused a zeal for freedom.

¹⁴ Aslan, 112-113.

This zealous understanding showed that Roman culture abused persons and used the misappropriation of values to do so. It addicted the least of these to a set of values—for becoming clean and unclean—that served only to line the pockets of those whom the system set up to keep them appearing oppressed, docile and satisfied.

In the context of violence found in specific North Nashville areas, the misunderstanding of values lines the pockets of persons who have found this area to be a place where the vulnerable reside. Hooking such people to drugs and to money—no matter how the money is secured—keeps those in the area seemingly quiet, passive and content. Such is not the case however. What appears to be serenity and indifference is ignorance of the plight in these neighborhoods. Aslan gives theological and historical weight to the notion that, beneath the façade of harmony lies a rage that cries out to be expressed. In Jesus' days, the cross was the punishment from outside the community. In this era it comes by way of guns, from within and without.

The critical nature of Aslan's work for this project comes in his historical analysis of who Jesus of Nazareth was and his context. For Jesus to be among the forlorn and abused invites—in the clearest terms—the body of Christ called the church to be present where his ministry happened: among the poor and dispossessed. Interpreting Jesus' ministry as vehement and fanatical towards justice gives the urgency necessary for life-saving and life-giving activity. Such resolve makes for persistence towards solutions rather than giving in or giving up by only offering rituals. To follow Jesus of Nazareth means to take seriously the plight of the downtrodden and to work, beyond and because of sanctuary worship, so that transformation can happen.

Katie Geneva Cannon

In *Teaching Preaching*, Katie Geneva Cannon proceeds to explicate the fundamentals of Black preaching according to her mentor, Isaac Rufus Clark. She speaks of Clark's unique view on what the sermon proposes to do, how the sermon is properly constructed and then why this construction is essential for sharing transformative truth. Cannon constructs her discourse to include a critique of ineffective preaching, a discussion of the anatomy of the sermon and a discussion of religion that transforms. This measured and honoring text offers an expectation that is fundamental to this project: preaching should make a difference in the lives of hearers and how the hearers then encounter the world. Preaching should inspire, motivate and instruct people to live in converted and converting ways.

The heart of this work is the Clark definition of preaching. "Preaching is divine activity wherein the Word of God is proclaimed or announced on contemporary issues for an ultimate response to God."¹⁵ This is the foundation of the Clark theological interpretation of homiletics. The idea of divine activity is discussed as being clear that God is the preacher who chooses humans as instruments for Godly proclamation; that is to say, the word declared must be viewed as originating from divinity, not in humanity. God proposes what needs to be said and heard; humans get to be the agents of delivery because preaching should be proclaimed or announced. Clark focuses even more on the agency of humans in the preaching drama as he dissects the term proclaim. Cannon writes,

¹⁵ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2002), 4.

The literal meaning of proclaimed is pro, a prefix meaning for, in favor of, in behalf of, claim, the root meaning to own or being the owner. The implications . . . proclaimed or announced for us as ministers is that we are agents, stewards, representatives and caretakers for the owner. We are not the big boss but the straw bosses. Us is posed to be de foremen (ses) around here. Like Ed McMahon, we say “Heeeeeeeer’s Johnny!”¹⁶

There should be no mistake this godly undertaking called preaching is owned by God alone. Stewards called preachers speak the word that comes from God. No one else can make claim to the preached word. This word of God, this content, is not the written word. It is God’s self. God’s word is God coming to be with and among the hearers to not only move with them but to move in them. Cannon writes that the word is both grace and truth. It is grace in that it is the receiving of good that has not been earned. It is truth in that it moves for the intent and purposes of God for humans. It speaks to the gifts and calls of people and to their acceptance of these as opposed to rebelling against or refusing to receive God’s truth for life.

This divine activity, called the Word of God, is proclaimed or announced on contemporary issues. This means, according to Cannon, that relevance is essential to preaching. Cannon says,

The relevant, existential context bears upon the living needs of people here and now, in terms of some divine blessing in the current killing conditions, since the genuinely theological must relate to the sociological and the genuinely vertical must relate to the horizontal. The real-life situation is relative to the question ‘Is there any balm in Gilead to heal my wounded soul?’ so that the gospel will be focused on living issues.¹⁷

¹⁶ Cannon, 44. This use of dialect was common for Clark, deepening the cultural connection in his pedagogy.

¹⁷ Ibid., 49.

This according to Cannon is where much preaching falls despicably short, as in the following example:

An instance of white jackleg irrelevance occurred in a downtown Birmingham church where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was leading a campaign for freedom in 1963. In the midst of fire hoses, biting dogs, and police brutality, this white jackleg paahstuh preached on the subject, "How to Grow Old Gracefully. . . ." Black jackleg irrelevance can be found in the frequent preoccupation with something dead or foolish as it relates to using or abusing the meaning of the bible. . . . My intent is not to be irreligious but to raise the question of relevance of the gospel to the problems of the people here and now for blessing. People must see the connection between what happened and their particular needs¹⁸

Sermons bogged down in irrelevance have no place in moving worship celebration to transformative action. God sends the word for more than ritual. God sends the word for relevance. It is that relevance that demands ultimate response. The reason for preaching is to elicit a positive reaction from the hearers.

The meaning of ultimate response, the fifth and final element in the definition of preaching, has to do with the divine objective of gospel proclamation wherein there is a call for a reaction to the to the claims and demands of God in genuine preaching, for either entering into or growing up in the Kingdom of God through a positive decision. A positive reaction is to decide to do, or to feel or to think or to be something holy and different in relation to our Maker. It is either a yay or an irresponsible nay to the holy claims (ownership) and righteous demand (obedience) of God in the genuine gospel, since there is no neutral ground for a maybe. Neutrality cannot prevail where genuine preaching takes place. By nature, it always does one of two things—either draws people into the arms of God or drives them further into our sins.¹⁹

The preached word demands response. It does not allow middle-of-the-road reaction. It does not stand for neutrality or noninvolvement. The expectation is that when confronted with God's word it compels a decision from those who listen. The response is to affirm or reject. This is essential to this project because the expectation is that the word and

¹⁸ Cannon, 49-50.

¹⁹ Ibid., 51.

table experience will generate affirmation towards actions that will make change in the environment, change that affirms life and rejects violence death and injury.

The essential nature of Cannon's text for this project is to demonstrate that preaching does not occur for entertainment value alone or fundamentally. Preaching happens to move people to divine thinking, acting and being. The ends sought in the preached word are decisive reactions to divinity, what Cannon calls ultimate response to God. This ultimate response brings glory to God and affirms that God has spoken. This project is designed to inspire and challenge worshippers to hear God and, from that hearing, to work towards the kind of change that answers and glorifies God.

Eddie Glaude

In his brief but provocative article, *The Black Church is Dead*, Eddie Glaude challenges nostalgia of the Black church. He opines that the notion of the good the church has done is overstated and the good it can do remains sub-optimized. Opening with this sentence —incendiary for many—“The Black Church, as we've known it or imagined it, is dead,” he suggests that the church has been romanticized in both its impact and its desire for relevance.²⁰ He writes, “the idea of this venerable institution (the Black church) as central to black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared.”²¹ His critique offers a significant challenge to this present project, not because of his pronouncements alone, but because he offers insights not often uttered within the church, much less considered. Glaude posits three reasons specifically

²⁰ Eddie Glaude, “The Black Church Is Dead,” *Huffington Post*, accessed December 14, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html.

²¹ Ibid.

for offering his ecclesiastical postmortem: 1) Black churches have always been complicated spaces; 2) African American communities are much more differentiated than often recognized; 3) There has been a routinization of black prophetic witness.²²

Saying that Black churches have always been complicated spaces, Glaude reminds readers that the church possesses a capacity for fighting change that cannot be ignored. He disavows the notion that the Black church embraced the institutional need to be prophetic and progressive. Conservation of the status quo has largely been the name of the game. He writes, “Our traditional stories about them—as necessarily prophetic and progressive institutions—run up against the reality that all too often black churches and those who pastor them have been and continue to be quite conservative.” Recalling Prophet Jones and Reverend Ike, Glaude says that the dalliance between the Black church and the prosperity preacher is far from a new phenomenon. He recalls that the birth of the Progressive Baptist Convention occurred because of consistent obscurantism found in the National Baptist Convention. The practice of safeguarding the status quo has long been a lifestyle of the Black church. Glaude says that this aspect of the church is too often submerged to a different reality that he suggests is not reality at all.²³

Speaking to the differentiations of African American communities, The Black church, according to Glaude, cannot hold on to a claim of center stage in Black life. There are other vital institutions in communities that take the allegiance of persons. While Glaude does not mention these, in this project there is the clear contention of fraternities and sororities, educational institutions and athletic events-collegiate and

²² Glaude.

²³ Ibid.

professional. All these demonstrate that the church has a significant challenge relative to claiming a central space. He offers a further challenge in saying that there are White pastors of mega-churches that hold significant numbers of black members. He takes the position that these are examples that offer an alternative view about the position of the Black church as the central or the pivotal institution in the lives of Black people.

All this then moves to his third offering: the routinization of black prophetic witness. The missional church, in its behavior and in its verbal witness, necessarily lives in prophetic utterance. This is because it offers challenge to issues that deny life in its surrounding community. It addresses needs that the gospel of Jesus Christ stands for as life giving. The Black church, according to Glaude, cannot assert this as a consistent position. He writes;

Too often the prophetic energies of black churches are represented as something inherent to the institution, and we need only point to past deeds for evidence of this fact. Sentences like, "The black church has always stood for . . ." [or] "The black church was our rock. . . ." [or] "Without the black church, we would have not . . ." In each instance, a backward glance defines the content of the church's stance in the present—justifying its continued relevance and authorizing its voice. Its task, because it has become alienated from the moment in which it lives, is to make us venerate and conform to it.²⁴

Glaude challenges the churches to live in mission by raising the question as to whether or not the vision of the Black church is merely a prophetic memory. He further suggests that this vision is a poor vision, a case of historic, intellectual and spiritual cataracts where the church sees something darkly and interprets that mistaken view for something that was never really the case. He continues to offer strong critique in this regard:

The question becomes: what will be the role of prophetic black churches *on the national stage* under these conditions? Any church as an institution ought to call

²⁴ Glaude.

us to be our best selves—not to be slaves to doctrine or mere puppets for profit. Within its walls, our faith should be renewed and refreshed. We should be open to experiencing God's revelation anew. But too often we are told that all has been said and done. Revelation is closed to us and we should only approximate the voices of old.

Or, we are invited to a Financial Empowerment Conference, Megafest, or some such gathering. Rare are those occasions when black churches mobilize *in public and together* to call attention to the pressing issues of our day. We see organization and protests against same-sex marriage and abortion; even billboards in Atlanta to make the anti-abortion case. But where are the press conferences and impassioned efforts around black children living in poverty, and commercials and organizing around jobs and healthcare reform? . . .

Prophetic energies are not an inherent part of black churches, but instances of men and women who grasp the fullness of meaning to be one with God. This can't be passed down, but must be embraced in the moment in which one finds one's feet. This ensures that prophetic energies can be expressed again and again.²⁵

Glaude's queries impact this project in that embracing the need in this moment is precisely what is called for. While the past prophetic and missional work of the Church must be embraced and appreciated, they cannot carry this age. New times find new issues. New issues demand new solutions. This work offers a profound and intense call to take a missional posture in the now, to never to assume liberation behavior. It is a challenge to what this Black church offers. It is a reminder that worship that is lifestyle impacts the streets and communities where that worship happens. Glaude's article gives a piercing critique of the Black church. He says that there exists an exaggerated and sentimentalized view of the Black church that does not fair well under close scrutiny. He suggests that the liberating activity needed through the church often does not happen because the church has been a herald and a preserver of the status quo. This is crucial because the status quo

²⁵ Glaude.

offers a death style, not a lifestyle for men and women who live in the biased contexts of poor education and poor socioeconomic status.

Each of these resources spoke significantly to the overall focus of this project. Peterson and Cannon set a direction for making supporting the ways in which worship can stimulate worship as a true admiration of God; that is to say, finding celebration that moves from rituals to service. Aslan and Ellison set a framework in which to make relevant how the ministry and life of Jesus connects particularly to the GMUMC context. This economically challenged and politically circumscribed situation parallels the situation of Jesus and his people in considerable ways. Finally, the Glaude text shines a light on the temptation to sentimentalize and even exaggerate the presence and will of the Black church to make its mark on systemic situations of malice and bigotry in the community. This work invited accountability questions for the true history of the church in the face of oppressive situations and, in its critique, dares to invite new relevance so that transformative action can occur. Combined these documents offer a serious foundation and challenge to moving a congregation from worship in the sanctuary to worship in the street, missional behavior that makes change in the name of Jesus in the face of oppressive situations and, in its critique, dares to invite new relevance so that transformative action can occur.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This project focuses on how worship celebrations become transforming activity in the world because of confronting community issues and needs. The significance of so doing will be nurturing, inspiring and motivating people such that options to disrupt pain and to develop divine life giving can happen. To influence the unique social order in which the church is located offers the opportunity to make attendance at worship more than a statistic. It can become a meaningful place for making discipleship to Jesus Christ.

The goal of this project is to invite and inspire service through Word and Table. The Word, in Sacrament and Proclamation, has the possibility of sending a congregation into ministry that can connect the rituals and resources of liturgy in meaningful ways to address issues in the world. It can be a means of moving persons to decrease the violence that besets a neighborhood by inviting people to expect God's presence in and beyond the sanctuary. This chapter contains an investigation of Psalm 34: 1 and Romans 12: 1-2. The supposition drawn is that God expects worship that lives beyond worship spaces and gatherings. Psalm 34 opens, as a song/poem that exalts the Lord, reminding that the entirety of life is to worship God. This says, all but explicitly, that a sacred/secular dichotomy does not exist. The text of Romans 12 invites persons to offer holy and acceptable lifestyles, not death styles or lifeless rituals, as worship to God. Sacrifice

comes not in what is killed and offered; it comes through standards of living that offer obedience and submission to God's purposes found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, in the light of these biblical texts, worship happens in and beyond sanctuaries. Valid worship shows itself as bodies and minds are transformed and demonstrate commitment to God in daily life. Historically, the eighteenth century Wesleyan revival illustrates worship that made change. The Anglican Church suffered mistrust due to corruption and a lack of concentration on prophetic, disciple making ministry for community and national change. This era offered a peak occasion for revitalization in that religious context. The Wesleyan movement was not an attempt to create a new religion or denomination. It happened to offer restoration and refocusing on the interior life that made for exterior results. Utilizing innovative structure in addition to Anglican worship life-particularly preaching and singing that happened in society gatherings but also adding classes and bands-rejuvenation transpired that changed life in England. This history demonstrates the biblical notion of worship that lives. Applying this scriptural concept has been shown to revive a church and influence the direction of a nation.

Theologically, the study has been to discover importance of Word and Table for freeing persons to a celebration that becomes service. Worship does not happen only in the sanctuary. Worship happens where followers of Jesus happen to find themselves. Thus the Church does not merely have worship. It lives worship by revitalizing and being released from irrelevant religious habits through covenantal life with God and with other followers of Jesus. The Wesleyan Movement demonstrates this. Sharing in life together in society meetings and classes caused a different kind of life beyond those meetings and

Anglican worship. Methodists were freed to make a difference in the world and did that. They lived covenant with one another and with God, for the good of the world. The impact was a liberated society. From fears and oppression to a living purpose, the God known in Jesus the Christ, grows and builds persons to act for their own freedom and the freedom of others. The liberation idea speaks to the motive and the aim for God's covenant. God interrupts history for the good of humanity. Despite the suffering and fright life can bring, God comes to redeem and bring persons out. God's people respond by entering into covenant with their entirety. Entering into this covenant offers transformation to them and through them into those who are not in the worshipping community.

These foundations speak to this project in that they speak a different aspect about a particular truth relative to Christian religion: it is religion for and about those in trouble, those who have been shackled, injured or broken by life. They speak to transformation from the perspective of the Creator who works especially for on the behalf. As liberation theologies declare, God has a preference for the oppressed. The context of this project is an oppressed context. Using these three as the undergirding for study finds the potential for moving the congregation into meaningful ministry just where it is needed. These invite movement from the safety of the church edifice to the risks of the street. However, it is in the risks that the reward of the gospel—holistic deliverance—can be found and shared with those who need deliverance the most.

Biblical Foundation

Worship celebrations that inform and inspire persons towards transformative action makes for a congregation that is relevant to its community and that that builds towards positive community change. Understanding worship as thoughtful and intentional behavior, towards ministry beyond the worship event, can foster behavior in a ministry that addresses the particularities of a community. The essence of this project is positively changed lives because of changed thinking and behavior. It is important to ground this and any type of worship in a biblical foundation. This paper proposes that Psalm 34 and Romans 12 call for worship that is a catalyst for action. Such action brings change to the community. It will thus offer examination of Psalm 34 and Romans 12 to offer evidence, discussing three aspects of Psalm 34, namely dating, structure and certain language concerns. Next, the paper turns to Romans 12 to discuss its dating, context, and structure. Finally, the paper takes the conclusion from its exegetical work to show how both passages can be used collaboratively to address the work of moving worship-personally or corporately-to transformative action in addition to ritual.

Psalm 34

Psalm 34 appears to have been composed during the Persian period.¹ This time followed an occasion of exile and persecution that found the Judean people in great mourning. The capture of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple and the palace as well as the overall destruction of this capitol and holy city for the Judeans caused great anguish.

¹ Samuel Terrein, *The Psalter: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 305.

William L. Holladay says this Persian period offered to the exiled captives their return to Jerusalem but this was not the Jerusalem noted before its fall.²

Holladay argues that this time of reconstruction found some notable distinctions between the Jerusalem before and after its devastation. Because of Jerusalem's destruction, the Judean people were keenly aware of vulnerability as a nation. The destroyed city wall allowed access to foreign looters and outlaws. Further, factions arose among the people: those who supported the priestly authorities in the temple and those who opposed those same authorities. Holladay additionally claims that at least three different people groups: Samaritan, Ammonites and Arabs opposed the wall's reconstruction.³

Yet, there came a time when worship resumed and the Judeans worked to rebuild normalcy. This post exilic population, according to Charles Lee Feinberg, was characterized by some measure of peace not known during exile and, with the Temple having been rebuilt for nationhood and worship, accorded occasion for the creating and compiling of other songs for praise and worship.⁴

Psalms 34 reflects particular characteristics of this post-exilic period. Holladay proposes first that the Jewish people were now convinced that the God of Israel was the only God. The Lord was the sole and only shepherd of the world.⁵ Secondly, using other writings of the period to support claims made (Haggai, Zachariah 1-8, Isaiah 56-66, Ezra

² William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 55.

³ Holladay, 55-6.

⁴ Charles Lee Feinberg, "The Date of the Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 104, no. 416 (October-December 1947), 437.

⁵ Holladay, 10-11.

and Nehemiah), Holladay suggests that the name Yahweh was obscured, perhaps even censored by the time the Second Temple was built. In places where the name Yahweh would have been employed, such as the aforementioned writings and Psalm 34, the nomenclature “Adonai” substituted for it. The name of God was viewed in this period as too holy to be pronounced routinely.⁶ In the same manner that “Yahweh is my shepherd” becomes “The Lord is my shepherd” in Psalm 23,⁷ “I will bless Yahweh” becomes “I will bless the Lord” in Psalm 34. Holladay further believes praise to God that was pioneering arose during this time and is reflected in the psalm.⁸ He proposes an expanded awareness of wonder for God, as a phrase, “those who fear God” became conventional for this period.⁹ This shift in nomenclature demonstrates a ritualistic significance for God-talk. At this point, to even speak God’s name is to profane it. This shows a particular veneration that differs from the reverence shown prior to the exile. God is not to be taken for granted, even in the calling of God’s name. This shows a worshipful awe and reverence and, as found in Psalm 34:9, gives at least an invitation to change corporate behavior and speech.

According to James Luther Mays, Psalm 34 models three structural elements that are characteristic of songs of gratitude:

1. Praise addressed to the Lord that rehearses the cry for help and reports God’s response to the cry;
2. Summons to a worshipping community to join the praise and testimony about the meaning for deliverance and how the delivered live;

⁶ Holladay, 6.

⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁹ Ibid.

3. Presentation of praise/sacrifice to keep promises made in the prayer/cry for help.¹⁰

Verses 1-3 form a shorter song within the psalm that extols God. The psalmist witnesses to God's goodness and invites worshippers to join in the praise and glorification.¹¹ This section of the psalm commends a worshipping commitment to the Lord.

Verses 4-10 call the worshipping community to join the psalmist. This writer claims that he sought the Lord and was delivered. Because the psalmist has experienced some pleasing event, he maintains that those who seek God are heard, saved, protected and delivered. This experience leads him to claim for the entire community that those who call on God do not languish in despair according to the Psalm. So jubilant is the psalmist that he asserts that God is immanent, especially in the travails of God's people. This section of the psalm has the individual testify as to why worship is important for the writer and the community.

Verses 11-22 offer admonition and instruction based on the psalmist's experience. From his individual experience, he claims God will bring redemption. Shirley S. Ho argues, concerning all the Psalms, that "each of the different literary forms is one of the following within its own literary genre: expanding on, confessing, appealing to, responding to, entreating, and praising the divine retributive justice of Psalm 1."¹² She

¹⁰ James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 24.

¹¹ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), 297.

¹² Shirley S. Ho, "The Righteous is Blessed, the Wicked are Cursed: The Divine Retributive Justice of Psalm 1 in the Literary Forms of the Psalter," *Scripture and Interpretation* 2, no. 2 (2008), 177.

further claims, “This divine retributive justice principle finds its parallel in Deuteronomy’s curses and blessings. In Deuteronomy, the one who obeys the Torah of YHWH is blessed, while the one who disobeys is cursed.”¹³ While one may find Ho extreme in making all Psalms related to Psalm 1, if it follows that obedience is blessed and disobedience is afflicted, Psalm 34 connects by its view of retributive justice. This justice indeed invites individual and corporate worship/thanksgiving to God. In verses 11-12, the writer entreats worshippers to “listen” to him if they “love life” and “desire to see many good days. But if not, the psalmist threatens in verse 16 “the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” As if such a warning is too mild, the psalmist intensifies the threat to those who do not follow his teaching, claiming that God will “blot out their name from the earth.” This gives a two-fold reason for worship: God’s favor to the psalmist on the one hand; God’s troubling of evildoers on the other. The psalm teaches this notion: the Lord rescues and saves those who fear God; condemnation comes to the wicked, to any who do not seek refuge in God. This displays God’s redemption as a reason for worship that is a change in behavior.

In addition to the aforementioned structural division, the psalm also utilizes acrostic as a literary device. Mays says an acrostic structure intends to demonstrate a totality, a unity of purpose and clarity of structure that guides the reader as the text is encountered.¹⁴ Further, the acrostic form possesses historic merit in that it may have been used for the purposes of providing writers distinctive configurations out of which to

¹³ Ho, 179.

¹⁴ Mays, 28

express themselves as well as being effective mnemonic devices for learning.¹⁵ Psalms, similar to any songs that arise from a community, carry information about a culture, its experiences, and its moral and aesthetic values. Such use provided with a way of reinforcing both their cultural identity and of constructing behavior through repeated faith statements.

As a different pattern for written expression, acrostic may thus have been a particular manner by which authors spoke to their theology and their culture. The cultural distinction for the Hebrew people could be served by offering “God talk” in this form. This to say that repeated and memorized declarations about God offered ways of remembering whom a particular people said God was and how God behaved towards them and the world. As a mnemonic opportunity for recollection, acrostic served as a means of inculcating behavior, history and theology.

It should be noted that acrostic serves as a literary device both in and outside of Hebrew culture. Acrostics are found among Greek and Latin poets, in various types of English literature and in almost every other language according to Kent Harold Richards.¹⁶ Acrostic is thus shown as one form used to inculcate beliefs and behaviors across people groups and across a variety of issues in life.

Psalm 34 also seems to use acrostic as a familiar way of theologically expressing one’s need for aid and gratitude for help. The use of acrostic appears to be a literary means of culturally instructing the community to continually thank God according to

¹⁵ Peter C. Gracie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, 19 (Waco, TX, Word Books, 1983), 129.

¹⁶ Kent Harold Richards, “Psalm 34,” *Interpretation* 40, no. 2 (April 1986), 176.

Richards.¹⁷ Structurally, the whole of the psalm taught lessons about worship as a way of living beyond and even because of ritual.

In addition to its structure, aspects of the psalm's language are noteworthy for this discussion. The ideas to which these aspects make indication are of import to the movement from worship celebration to the kind of worship service that can make life change. In the NRSV, *Anav* is the Hebrew term for the word that is translated as humble in Psalm 34:3. It is derived from the verb *anah*. The term means, "to be afflicted, be bowed down, be humbled, be meek."¹⁸ In the noun form it means "poor, humble or meek." In the history of Israel, particularly before the exile and following, the noun came to have a special connection with Israel's faithful ones who were being abused and taken advantage of by the rich.¹⁹ By using this word, the writer invites the oppressed or afflicted to receive this testimony in their own lives, a testimony that could make life change.

This psalmist also offers language of empowerment. Using the phrase "*Bareku YHWH*" bless the Lord, Dawes declares that there is a reversal of blessings of individuals and the people of God. He claims that the phrase connotes a strength and power that is difficult to capture in English or perhaps other translated languages. There is here a bowing before God that demonstrates that the created stands beneath the Creator. More than that, these words assert that the Creator should be credited as above the created and does so with an interesting twist: there can be a blessing reversal. The God of all things

¹⁷ Richards, 151.

¹⁸ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 119.

¹⁹ Ibid.

can receive something, the God who created all and stands over all. This is peculiar and intriguing. The psalm asserts that God is the object of blessing rather than only the subject who blesses. God receives respect and tribute as blessing. This language displays God who also receives rather a one-dimensional deity who can only give. As Nancy L. DeClaise-Walford writes about all flesh before God in the recitation of Psalm 145 is the case for the “blesser” in Psalm 34: God’s holy name shall be blessed for all time.²⁰

This phraseology claims more than praising or thanking God, both of which offer a kind of human subservience or passivity. The psalmist claims honor and reverence for all that God does and all that God is. Here the writer suggests human empowerment for ascribing to reverence, majesty, adoration and deference to God. As humans give these, humanity can be viewed as giving blessing to God.²¹

The psalm demonstrates one type of understanding of the worshipful life, a life that testifies to the empowerment of the subjugated. The empowerment comes through the witness of one who overcomes and, in so doing, gives honor and commitment to God. The psalmist’s ethnic history can be viewed as foundational to the testimony and to offering hortatory evidence as proof even though the particular issue that was overcome is not revealed. This implies that the faith of the community will be lived out in the world.

To explain this, Psalm 34 bears a superscription that is worth noting. The NRSV translation reads: “Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he

²⁰ Nancy L. deClaise-Walford, “Psalm 145: All Flesh Will Bless God’s Holy Name,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (January 2012), 56.

²¹ Stephen B. Dawes, “‘Bless the Lord:’ An Invitation to Affirm the Living God,” *Expository Times* 106, no. 10 (July 1995), 293.

drove him out, and he went away.” Cynthia Edenburg notes that this incident is recounted in 1 Samuel 21:10-15 and that the King is Abimelech, not Achish. She writes,

However, the Psalm superscription makes no reference to Gath, Philistines or enemy territory, and further identifies the king before whom David ‘changed his behavior’ as Abimelek rather than Achish. It would appear that the scribe who devised the superscription was not quoting from a Samuel scroll, but was familiar with a core tradition in which David “changed his behavior” before an unidentified Philistine ruler.²²

The point made is that this core tradition relative to David was deemed important for the religious life of Israel.

An additional twelve psalms “have headings which refer to moments in the history of King David as recorded in the books of Samuel.”²³ David is an important hero in Israel’s history. According to Johnson, his figure is utilized both by the Chronicler (author of Chronicles) and the author of the superscriptions. Vivian Johnson holds that the former improves David’s image by omitting embarrassing moments as found in the Samuel narratives; the latter accomplishes a more virtuous image by exposing David’s troubled times.²⁴ Both renderings suggest an accessible archetype, one that can serve as a model for how to live in worshipful obedience to God, especially in difficult situations.

The Psalm 34 superscription demonstrates David as a model in a time of threat to one’s life. Under threat, the Psalmist claims God’s goodness after overcoming the threat—a goodness which is expressed by praise and thanksgiving in and beyond this dangerous situation, saying:

²² Cynthia Edenburg, “Notes on the Origin of the Biblical Tradition Regarding Achish King of Gath,” *Vetus Testamentum* 61, no. 1 (2011), 34.

²³ Vivian L. Johnson, *David in Distress: His Portrait through the Historical Psalms* (New York, NY: T and T Clark International, 2009), 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
 2 My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.
 3 O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. 4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

David is viewed as discussing worshipful living in response to redemption from peril. The superscription suggests he invites the worshipping community to do the same, to live the faith when in danger as well as to offer the homage in ritual.

Dated during the Second Temple period, Psalm 34 comes from a worshipping community that has come through a time of enormous duress. The pain of exile, rebuilding the temple and all that came with that sets the stage for worship that speaks to overcoming. Affirming God's goodness as to what has been surmounted speaks to worship that lives beyond ritual. It invites the community to learn and recall worshipful obedience by way of its acrostic form and its message of redeemed obedience. Finally, its superscription-calling the hallowed name of King David- presents an important Hebraic model for the results of a faith that will "bless the Lord at all times."

Romans 12: 1-2

A similar faith understanding can be ascribed to Romans 12:1-2, which reads, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." According to David G. Horrell, "Romans provides the clearest example in the Pauline corpus of the 'pattern' of theology followed by ethics, the latter grounded in the

former.”²⁵ He discusses Romans 12:1-2 as a “headline statement for all that follows.”²⁶

This is the point of departure for arguing that Romans 12:1-2 establishes a foundation for worship that leads to transformative action.

C.K. Barrett suggests that the dating of Romans cannot be exactly pinpointed. Having said that, he puts forward the idea that because of the view of Acts 24:27, an approximate date can be given. The Acts passage indicates that Felix had been procurator for two years. Paul reached Jerusalem in the year that Felix was recalled and Festus succeeded him. From this, Barrett deduces that Romans was written in early 55(C.E.).²⁷ Calvin L. Porter claims 55-57 C.E as the dates.²⁸

At the time this letter was composed, the Roman environment was of a context of a densely populated city. The tremendous growth of the city, according to James C. Walters, is explained best by the immigrations of extensive numbers of persons to the city. These persons were of both Italian and foreign backgrounds.²⁹

Persons who were born as Roman citizens or who had received Roman citizenship accepted the *Pax Romana* (Roman peace) was just and adhered to it John B. Cobb, Jr. and David J. Lull quote P. A. Brunt who principally says the peace was presented by the Roman government as divinely ordained. There was a sense, according to Brunt, that

²⁵ David G. Horrell, “The Peaceable, Tolerant Community and the Legitimate Role of the State: Ethics and Ethical Dilemmas in Romans 12:1-15:13,” *Review and Expositor* 100, no. 1 (2003): 81.

²⁶ Horrell, 83.

²⁷ C. K. Barrett, *Black's New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans* (London, UK: A.C. Black Publishers Limited, 1991), 5.

²⁸ Calvin L. Porter, “Paul as Theologian: Romans,” *Encounter* 65, no.2 (2004): 113.

²⁹ James C. Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 7.

lands and peoples were acquired by Rome's fighting for its own security and to assist in protecting allies of the state.³⁰ The citizens believed that because of conquest or assisting in conquest, Rome was naturally conferred the right to rule over the conquered and to exact profit from them.³¹ The power and profit of Rome served as a magnet. Rome grew to such size and density that some compared it to modern day Bombay or Calcutta.³² Rome swelled because many immigrants intentionally came seeking for economic or commercial advancement. Some were forced to the city because poor economic conditions.³³ Many others came, against their will, as the bounty of foreign wars and the slave trade.³⁴ Rome's imperialism made for economic and political power as well as significant numbers of poor and oppressed, among which were both Jew and Gentile.

As these outsiders settled into Rome, evidence suggests that they developed sections of the city where they could live with persons of the same nationality. These places allowed for the development of life similar to way they lived in their native lands. Walker says that, as has universally been the case, these pockets allowed for comfort and security.³⁵ In other words, the Roman state allowed local populations to retain their cultural and religious identities. For these people groups, religion served to celebrate

³⁰ John B. Cobb and David J. Lull, *Romans* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 21; Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), 17. Cobb and Lull seem to address this from a Gentile perspective, Aslan from a Jewish perspective.

³¹ Cobb, 21.

³² Walters, 7.

³³ Aslan, 17.

³⁴ Walters, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

indigenous identities. It provided ways to recall their homelands and to pass traditions to their offspring.³⁶

Associations further offered ways for populations groups to maintain ethnic and religious identity. According to Walters, A.D. Nock defined an association as “a group which a man [*sic*] joins of his own free will, and which accepts him of its free will, and this mutual acceptance creates certain obligations on both parties.”³⁷ These free associating assemblies were formed among immigrants who shared trade, commercial and religious connections. Also, they provided fellowship and social interaction. Usually, they were held among the lowest in the economic strata, including even the enslaved. However, their political involvement conflicted with Roman law. Walters writes, “The political involvement of many associations, combined with disturbances during the late republic, led to the banning of collegia (64 BCE) because they were deemed to be politically subversive”³⁸ Non-citizens gathering in cults and associations, along with the forbidding responses of Rome, shows Romans was composed in a context of diversity, oppression and minority search for identity and empowerment. This is in keeping with some of the stated intent in Romans found in 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the *obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name* (italics mine), 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, 7 To all God's beloved in Rome, who are

³⁶ Walters, 15.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The book of Romans discusses Paul's intent to bring those outside Judaism into this faith. As a Jew, he can be presumed have experienced Roman oppression. As he writes to the Christian community of Rome—primarily Gentile—he writes to people wrestling with domination and displacement, aiming to inspire them to this faith in Jesus. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul exhorts people, surrounded by a context of political and economic struggle, to behave in a particular fashion as their worship. Barrett discusses these verses as the beginning of Paul's ethical discussion. Paul's system of belief, his theology, that articulates salvation by grace through faith, has been predominant in the first 11 chapters and is now followed by an ethical discussion. Barrett goes on to posit that Paul's positions theologically are misunderstood if seen as separated from his ethical expectations.³⁹

Positing that Paul has a system of belief has its challengers. As stated earlier, Horrell sees Paul's work here as a pattern but argues that Paul does not have a systematic exposition, viewing with others various factors, both in Paul's life and in the churches at Rome, which influence the shape and content of this letter.⁴⁰ However, he does say that it may be well that some of the key themes and convictions regarding Paul's ethics should be considered.⁴¹ Cobb and Lull suggest that Paul is consistent here with his other letters. Structurally, they say that Paul's hortatory discourse always preceded direction; that is to

³⁹ Barrett, 212.

⁴⁰ Horrell, 82. Karl Barth is the example he uses, but he implies that other work has been done to discredit the discussion of a system of belief.

⁴¹ Ibid.

say, what Paul says should be believed is followed by the way said belief should be lived.⁴² He invites the readers to practice the implications of the words he has written so that their living is formed, not merely their thinking, in a sacrificial manner.

This structural conversation brings to light another liturgical value, the priority of sacrifice. On the one hand, valuing sacrifice, as found in the Old Testament, shows itself to be essential here. Typical sacrifices employed the sacrifice of animal life. Slaughtering animals for religious purpose was a staple for many forms of Judaism at the time. Paul maintains that value in this text.⁴³

On the other hand, he calls for the sacrifice that is living. There is dissimilarity in that the bodies of the faithful are committed and alive, not slaughtered. Paul implores the Roman Christians to offer holy and acceptable lifestyles, rather than slaughtered animal life, as worship to God. The culture and context that knows about sacrifice is honored; however, the object of sacrifice does not lose life, it lives life differently. It is purposed to behave in transformed and transforming ways.

This kind of adoration of God and transformed living is connected, according to Nobuyishi Kiuchi, to Old Testament ritual and lifestyle. That sacrifices should be acceptable or pleasing to the Lord and should be holy is standard for any sacrifice.⁴⁴ It is the living (of the three epithets, holy and acceptable to God being the other two) that distinguishes the Romans' sacrifice and speaks to the need for lifestyle offering that is commensurate with ritual.

⁴² Cobb, 158.

⁴³ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁴ Nobuyishi Kiuchi, "Living Like the Azazel-Goat in Romans 12:1b" *Tyndale Bulletin* 57, no. 2 (2006): 252.

Kuichi argues that the life discussed in Romans 12:1 must not be presumed as spiritual only. The animal replaced the sacrifice-er by the laying on of hands. The substituted animal, thus touched became one with the sacrifice-er.⁴⁵ This imputes a particular posture on the sacrifice and sacrifice-er. Connected to each other, they now are both connected to God. Thus, Paul assumes a new definition regarding sacrifice. When he writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship,” Paul demonstrates that sacrifice can live. Christine Ledger says this is sacrifice that exists for the salvation God offers.

This sacrifice is to be understood as a lived faith that can never be viewed as solely intellectual or as in any way simple. A radical embrace of the faith and worship Paul offers here is genuine and authentic to the gospel.⁴⁶ Paul’s discussion of worship and sacrifice suggests a different life. The sacrifice, in gratitude, because of the mercies of God, exists in a new humanity.⁴⁷ This makes a new age. Honoring God comes in followers of Jesus whose behaviors benefit the community and those beyond it. The worshipful life appears to move beyond the person or worshipping community alone. This is worship that moves into the world. This worship is response to the God who is the granter of all mercies, as well as the arbiter of judgment. This decision not to “conform to

⁴⁵ Kiuchi, 255.

⁴⁶ Christine Ledger, “Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Mind: Reflections on Romans 12:1-2” *International Review of Mission* 80, no. 317 (January 1991): 71.

⁴⁷ Peter Rhea Jones, “The New Deadly Sins: Romans 12:1-2,” *Ex Auditu* 17 (2001): 156.

this world,” to break with the present society, means no longer aligning to its thoughts and practices. This is a transformative choice to adjust the self towards the will of God.⁴⁸

Further, this worship call to sacrifice is a communal appeal. It is not for individuals alone. The Romans letter is to the faith community, the aggregate of those who have decided and claimed to live in this transforming grace and mercy.⁴⁹ The logical response Paul invites is for the community to offer itself, Jew and Gentile, as a new community,⁵⁰ a novel and unusual people who will live transformed lives because of this worship, a worship that responds to the beliefs set forth earlier in Romans. So it is that the notion of a living sacrifice builds and develops the idea of spiritual worship. The living sacrifice that constitutes spiritual worship is more than ritual. It is life and behavior, existence and action. This is not to be confused with the notion of the scapegoat. The Azazel goat (scapegoat) of Leviticus 16 was a manner of this living sacrifice. One goat has hands laid on it by the priest, the priest confessing sin for the community. The goat is then sent into the wilderness, taking the sins of the community on itself.⁵¹

The scapegoat as a symbol of Paul’s living sacrifice appears a bit of a stretch.⁵² The goat goes into the wild to fend for itself. This can hardly be measured as a living sacrifice. It is much more akin to a sacrifice sent to die. Taking on sin and being sent away from where nurture and feeding happen can hardly be viewed as the offering of a

⁴⁸ Horrell, 84.

⁴⁹ Horrace E. Stoessel, “Notes on Romans 12:1-2: The Renewal of the Mind and Internalizing the Truth” *Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (April 1963): 163.

⁵⁰ Horrell, 83.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁵² *Ibid.*

living sacrifice. However there is in this the sense that the living sacrifice, and thus spiritual worship, is a sacrificed life, a life offered onto God. Again, this is the idea of the sacrifice that lives and is not killed. However, the Romans distinction comes because the living worshippers, rather than sending a live offering away, give themselves to God. Here the ritual and ceremony live. This is liturgy, the work of the people, in the truest sense of the term. Romans 12:1-2 is structured within the entire book to make a strong case for sacrifice but a new one, one in which the sacrifice lives to bring glory and blessing to God.

So then, in the context of Roman domination of Jew and Gentile, Paul invites those who will claim to be disciples of Jesus to be persons who will give themselves to God as living sacrifices. Romans 12: 1-2 is to an inclusive community of Jesus followers, one that receives Jew and Gentile, that lives differently together and in witness to the world beyond the community. This is the sacrifice that becomes what Paul describes as spiritual worship; that is to say, reasonable, logical worship that is distinct in his thought. The Greek word used for worship here, *latreia*, speaks to homage and service. It is about serving, ministering to, with and for God. In and of itself, this is of no real surprise. The distinction comes in its modifier:

[Paul's] use of 'reasonable worship,' even though it may have been mediated by the Hellenistic synagogue, signals the desire to set claim to a broad tradition of Graeco-Roman as well as Jewish philosophy of religion. In place of the *latreia* of the Jewish cult (9:24) or the worship of finite images in Greco-Roman cults (1:23), Paul presents the bodily service of a community for the sake of world transformation and unification as the fulfillment of the vision of worship that would be truly reasonable. In place of the enlightened individual, touted by

Greco-Roman philosophers, there now stands the rationality of a redeemed community committed to world mission⁵³

The physical worship of God's people, gathered and working for humanity's revolutionary harmony fulfills a vision of a thoughtful, reflective worship, worship that is sensible. Such worship becomes reasonable as it combines both the cultural standard of thoughtfulness (Greco-Roman) and the concomitant criterion of a particular people gathered in homage to their God. Rather than individual or simply personal commitment to praise God as a group, there now stands the sagacity and common sense of a devoted body of persons committed to a mission of world betterment in Jesus' name.

Romans 12:1-2 describes one view of the ethical life of the church. The living sacrifice describes a life commitment that is ongoing, for individuals and for the community, of those who follow Jesus Christ. This view demonstrates the idea that God desires this kind of veneration. It suggests a relationship that bears witness, to those outside the community, as to the obligations believers have to God. There is a new thinking that can offer a new behavior in the community and beyond it.

Conclusion

This kind of thinking and behaving, as worship, is essential to this project for addressing ways to bring about life changing service. There can be individual and community presentations of selves to God that model the nonconformist life. Transformed lives because of renewed minds are fundamental to this project. This transformation happens when persons bless God because of what God has done for them

⁵³J. Gerald Janzen, "A New Approach to "logikēn latreian" in Romans 12:1-2" *Encounter* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 46-47.

and what they have seen in others who have placed faith and trust in God. There are people who have been threatened, who have been in trouble but have seen what God can do despite that.

As was the case with the hearers of Psalm 34, the people who are part of this project context are descendants whose ancestors were enslaved and exiled. These ancestors were forced to come to America and the impact of enslavement/exile remains to this day. As in the context of the Psalms and Romans texts, persons of humble ancestry and afflicted beginnings experience unfair social, economic, political circumstances. They live through communal fears and vulnerabilities to persons of other ethnic backgrounds because of limited capacity to defend the community from attack. Further, they wrestle with the often-unheard terror of guns and other weapons within their own population.

Even with these historic and present dangers, the project context is one where persons live and/or worship in neighborhoods where they have yet built institutions that serve to make for a significant and even successful life. These associations include businesses, social services, lodges, orders, universities, temples, fraternities, sororities, social clubs and churches. These have offered success and significance, defining these as the capacity to forge a positive individual and community identity, the capability to earn a livable wage, the opportunity to build a sense of economic security and the actualized freedom to seek after hopes and aspirations. These churches and temples have been places of uplift and education. Hymns and songs served as mnemonic devices that taught persons who they were in spiritual terms that impacted their social existence. People in this context claim great blessings and favor by God. In sanctuary worship they offer

songs and testimonies that claim blessing by God and blessing of God. In a time of major economic upheaval, with public policy and street violence threatening the neighborhoods, these claims continue. In this new era and time, these claims are a challenge as threats continue and seem to expand.

Psalm 34:1 and Romans 12:1-2 can affirm particular opportunities of challenge for worship that lives beyond ritual. Engaged as such, they can lead people to hearing from God so that they can act for God. This worshipful hearing can move persons to transformative action, to make change in the community. It is community change because of worship that this project seeks to address.

Historical Foundation

Gathering people for worship can provide incentive to transformative actions. Missional congregations can conceivably become intentional catalysts, building worship that sends people into the world to behave in community changing ways. It can be a most significant way to demonstrate discipleship as followers of Jesus. This paper proposes the Wesleyan movement of the eighteenth century can offer a model for worship that spawns transformative action. It will address the impact of preceding philosophical and ecclesial eras with a limited examination of particular political and economic issues that confronted the era. It will discuss enslavement as an issue for the Anglican Church and as an issue that impacts the project setting. After this, there will be consideration of the Wesleyan renewal response, particularly the societies and their organization. The paper will close with deductions as to how this historical learning can impact a present day

project that moves worship to smaller groups for strategizing towards transformative action.

Preceding Philosophical and Ecclesial Eras

Seventeenth and eighteenth century England found enlightenment and its rationalism permeating religious, and particularly Christian, thought. According to Williston Walker, this rationalism impacted all aspects of the society.⁵⁴ As such, it may be argued that the principles and ethics of this age were shaped more by the life of the mind and as such, prioritized empiricism over spiritual conviction. The perceived power of reason appeared to be the order of the day.

In this environment, Christian religion has been viewed as instrumental in the expanse of European colonialism.⁵⁵ “Historically, Europe’s relationship to the church is documented from the New Testament until this century...Europe was a mission land, then it became the source of missionaries for Asia, Africa, North and South America.”⁵⁶ The expansion understood that “most of the ‘backward’ races have been placed in some sort of dependence upon one or other of the civilized powers as colony, protectorate, hinterland or sphere of influence.”⁵⁷ These practices of compulsory dependence can be assumed to derive from intellectual currents that placed great confidence in the human

⁵⁴ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1959), 454.

⁵⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper Brothers, 1953), 1002.

⁵⁶ J. Bryan Hehir, “The Old Church and the New Europe: Charting the Changes,” in *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, eds. Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 102.

⁵⁷ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, UK: Butler and Tanner, Ltd, 1961), 223.

mind. With advances in other disciplines showing the way, the viewpoint that intellect seemed to make anything possible was predominant. What could be conceived could be achieved. This became the driving force that manifested behavior and agendas in this era.⁵⁸

As empires practiced behaviors that were rationalized as advances, Christian religion consistently found itself connected with the same. For example, according to Osmundo A. Miranda, the church in Latin American history is viewed as “allied with the Spanish oligarchies and has taken both material and ‘spiritual’ advantage of that alliance.”⁵⁹ Christianity benefited from proselytizing behavior and did so to the detriment of others. Brian Stanley writes,

Missionary activity always holds an implicit psychological violence, however discretely it is conducted. It is aimed at turning the minds and hearts of people away from their native religion to one that is generally unsympathetic and hostile to it. . . . Missionary activity and conversion, therefore, is not about freedom of religion. It is about the attempt of one religion to exterminate all others.⁶⁰

This shows a church that overpowered, not one that empowered. Such overpowering could go hand in hand with governmental and colonizing dominance.

British church history demonstrates this fact. The Church of England, created in 1534, became a power base of religion in England. Henry VIII received the title “Defender of the Faith” after, supposedly, he authored and published the “Assertion of the Seven Sacraments,” a polemic against Martin Luther’s reformist views while Henry

⁵⁸ Latourette, 1002.

⁵⁹ Osmundo A. Miranda, “Aspects of Latin American Revolutionary Theologies,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1977): 3.

⁶⁰ Brian Stanley, “Conversion to Christianity: Colonization of the Mind” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 366 (July 2003): 315.

was yet a member, albeit a powerful member, of the Roman Catholic Church.⁶¹ Roman Catholic Church traditions were under scrutiny during this enlightened period; to have the king of one of the most authoritative and dominant nations as an apologist gave considerable weight to those traditions.

However, this weight could also make for considerable opposition to the church. Because Henry desired a male heir, he sought a divorce from his first wife Catherine (daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain).⁶² As this divorce would not be sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, King Henry VIII used the power of his office, British antagonism to foreign decrees, and the significance of his title as “Defender of the Faith” to ultimately create the Church of England.⁶³ Church and government found collaboration to benefit the rich and powerful. The Defender of the Faith used the power of office to create a new church.

Innovations occurred that distinguished the Church of England in its break from the Roman Catholic Church. Among these were the offerings of bible translations in English as well as Latin bibles in every congregation. Litanies began to be sung in English rather than solely in the traditional Latin.⁶⁴ From these British congregants gained more access to the bible and to reflecting on faith for themselves. So it is that this division of the church, while originating for the king’s personal benefit, it demonstrates that there were positives received by the everyday people of the church.

⁶¹ Latourette, 802, Walker, 358. Latourette questions that Henry VIII is the author, while Walker seems to embrace the idea.

⁶² Latourette, 800.

⁶³ Walker, 358.

⁶⁴ Latourette, 805.

Social changes caused by the Industrial Age also impacted the church. People were attracted to these manufacturing areas from other parts of the country. This urban growth and transformation ravaged rural areas. F. W. Dillistone says the city environments, where the reforms of the economy and the transformation of the society occurred, became the place to be, so much so that one half of England's population was found in the industrial towns by the time the revolution ended.⁶⁵

As production became more important, human beings seemed devalued. The needs, desires and feelings of people became secondary, even tertiary in the socio-economic system now in place.⁶⁶ The enlightenment period's intellectual influence, coupled with the Industrial Age economy, conspired to diminish people, especially those who would be considered underclass. The poor, the uneducated, and those of any other social misfortune became consequential only as a means for manufacturing. As Latourette writes of the Industrial Revolution, "Huge fortunes were accumulated by the few, moderate comfort was achieved by a large majority but for another minority, in some places a majority, the new industrial processes meant grinding toil, sordid poverty, and moral and physical degradation."⁶⁷ The church was impacted but offered little that made for a positive response. This is especially true regarding chattel slavery.

⁶⁵ F.W. Dillistone, "Britain and the Second Industrial Revolution," *Theology Today* 13, no. 1, April 1956, 11.

⁶⁶ Walker, 455.

⁶⁷ Latourette, 1065.

Chattel Slavery: Its Continued and Profound Impact

An issue that especially exemplifies this moral and physical degradation was chattel slavery. This systematic kidnapping, abuse, and violence pointed towards people of African descent represents a departure from any moral sense of freedom. Rationalism and expansion gave a sense that humanity could do anything that could be imagined. Liberty of thought, mind and body were the order of the day; however, as industry enriched some, the notion of freedom for all became expendable. Offering the philosophical options of freedom for that day, calling them transcendent freedom, covenantal freedom and freedom as a natural right, Earl J. Thompson, Jr. posits, “unlike the ideas of transcendent liberty and covenantal freedom, the doctrine of natural rights explicitly guarantees everyone personal liberty from political, social, and religious bondages.”⁶⁸ This moral and social freedom became a non-issue as the economy grew because freedom was denied to enslaved Africans.

Slavery was the economic engine of Europe and especially England. The drive to make more money made this New World enslavement adventure necessary. While Lorraine Dixon quotes Kenneth Little in saying that the African slave trade “only” became significant (numerically it seems) by 1660. That it did so because of economic growth is clear. She writes,

The Company of Royal Adventurers Trading in Africa was formed in 1663. This was superseded by the Royal African Company in 1672 which held the monopoly on British slave interests until 1698, by which time the pressure to engage in free trade proved irresistible. Shyllon states that with ‘free trade and the increasing demands of the sugar plantations, the volume of the British slave trade rose enormously. The Royal African Company, between 1680 and 1686, transported

⁶⁸ J. Earl Thompson, “Contradictions of Liberty,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1976): 157.

an annual average of 5,000 slaves. In the first nine years of free trade, Bristol alone shipped 160,950 black slaves to the sugar plantations. In 1760, 146 ships sailed from British ports for Africa, with a capacity for 36,000 slaves. By 1771 the number of ships had increased to 190 and the total number of slaves to 47,000.⁶⁹ As Britain took over former Spanish colonies, this resulted in a near monopoly regarding the slave trade.⁶⁹

Along with other colonizing nations from Europe, the British Empire owed the foundation, if not all, of its economic life, growth and development to this concentrated abuse of human beings.⁷⁰

According to Lerone Bennett, Christianity was used as a justification for enslavement. The religious traditions of enslaved Africans not only became reasons for dismissing them; the pagan label allowed them to be especially forced to abandon their native faiths. This abandonment served to make them more attuned to British-Protestant religion. Interestingly, confessing Christian faith would not change enslaved lives. The claim made was that it would save enslaved souls. Accordingly, Bennett says profits and religion joined conveniently for the sake of the economy of the empire.⁷¹ When reviewed with the laxity described by religion generally in eighteenth century England, chattel slavery helps define the state of English religion of the time. Staggering numbers of Africans were captured and enslaved or died enroute to slave trading ports.⁷²

Yet, it appears that this era was a time for some significant ministry by the church. Gatherings of persons, across denominational lines, for religious fellowship are recorded

⁶⁹ Lorraine Dixon, "The Nature of Black Presence in England before the Abolition of Slavery," *Black Theology* 5, no. 2 (2007): 173-174.

⁷⁰ Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (Chicago, IL: Johnson Publishing Company, 1987), 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷² John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf, 2000), 49.

to have happened with some success; in fact, by 1700 there were nearly 100 societies within the city of London and many had Anglican participants.⁷³ The industrial era and population made for much needed healing and help. This was a time that called for and initiated revival for the soothing and development of some human spirits. The church responded, in some places, to the crisis of human devaluation and should be credited. The response was not solely insignificant. Some people found relief and encouragement by way of religious practice.

Barrie Abraham offers supporting comments when he says that most people ascribed to some kind of faith regimen and calls these systems “folk religion.” In this era where people wrestled to make meaning of life, where violations of personal and/or corporate freedom occurred regularly, religion did in fact find a place in most British hearts. While it was true that the Anglican Church was governmentally preferred, it did have competitors and challengers for those who sought to be included in the church. This competition included variations on the still present Roman Catholic Church and some who stood outside the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. These were called dissenters.⁷⁴ While there was a primary and governmentally sanctioned faith body, dissenters and others offered belief systems and habits beyond it.

Yet, it is also recorded that these efforts soon waned. It can be surmised that the importance of survival and, if and when that was secured, of assuring that one was never threatened with a lack of survival again, became essential.⁷⁵ As the church in general—

⁷³ Walker, 455.

⁷⁴ Barrie Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism* (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1995), 4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

and the Church of England in particular—did not exist as a decision making power or alternative in survival issues, it became mostly, if not entirely irrelevant. While persons did have these ascriptions to some sort of faith system, most people in eighteenth century England rarely attended church. David Luke writes,

Spiritually and socially, the Church was characterized by a complacency and parochialism which ill equipped it to meet the challenges of the rapid changes in society. The Church of England was spiritually moribund, an institution in thrall to an aristocratic form of government which pervaded all levels of society. The Dissenting churches, having been exhausted by the struggle to survive in the last quarter of the 17th century, now — enjoyed the luxury of toleration. Toleration also afforded the further luxury of a series of doctrinal disputes, often on mundane matters, which had an enervating effect on dissenting life. The Church in the early part of the 18th century was marked by declining church attendance, spiritual aridity, or organizational inflexibility and the marginalization of the Church in society.⁷⁶

The environs of a church that exhibited insincerity around justice, fraudulence and corruption further made no good case for a sustained commitment and presence. There seemed to exist, for the most part, distrust of the church. However, it should be noted that the Anglican Church showed some leadership in the social order particularly as it was an accepted part of the English constitution. It served societal benevolence. Trained by church sponsored universities, most teachers were supplied by the Anglican Church. The church led assistance to the poor, benevolences to the indigent. It offered health care to the sick; however, excessive selfishness and corruption characterized it as well.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ David Luke, “The Church in an Age of Revolution: Society, Church and Technological Change,” 16 December 2007, Gilnahirk Baptist Church Web site, (accessed September 12, 2013) <http://www.gilnahirkbaptist.org.uk/resources/frontiers/1/2/luke-church-revolution.php> (This article first appeared in *Frontiers*, 1.2 (Autumn 1996): 30-35 and was used with permission).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The Industrial Revolution, enlightenment and its precipitated intellectual movements as well as the import of Protestant reformation converged to create a context for needed revival and restoration. This lethargy found leaders of the Anglican church who offered little by way of hope for a church struggling with listlessness. Tabraham indicates that Anglican clergy were viewed as consistent and reliable, but were also known for having little enthusiasm. They guided a cowardly church, one with little imagination or vision for a new day, and therefore being less than equipped or desiring to engage the distinction of this novel period in time.⁷⁸ Transformative action was needed but the church was not prepared to meet the challenges.

Wesleyan Renewal Response

It is in this context that John Wesley led a revival. As Wesley feared might happen later to Methodism, Anglicanism existed mostly “as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.” Wesley went on to say: “undoubtedly this will be the case, unless they hold fast both to the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”⁷⁹

The blessings of the church were present although—beyond ritual—hard to see. A lack of spirit and discipline kept the church from accessing the power available in the God it sought to serve. Assertive outreach beyond the aforementioned social welfare efforts was all but nonexistent. The lack of money, discouraging and agonizing as in any era, led to unhealthy pursuits of enjoyment throughout the general populace. Literacy

⁷⁸ Tabraham, 5.

⁷⁹ John Wesley, “Thoughts Upon Methodism,” *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, vol. 7, (New York, NY: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), Google Location, 311, Google Edition.

and education were not accessible and at times seemed unvalued. Alcoholism raged across Great Britain and the enforcement of laws seemed especially vile and violent. The church existed—filled with possibility—but seemed unaware of all it could offer. This was the context of the church in England.⁸⁰

Into this lethargic context a renewal effort happened, led by John Wesley. His personal change and subsequent leadership of a movement can be directly attributed to the transformation that happened in the life of his brother. Charles Wesley went to college and began to gather with colleagues who offered a sense of spiritual accountability and connection. His life was changing and, to keep the change alive, he made continual connection with older brother, John.⁸¹

When John received appointment to the college, it was not long before his authoritative nature found him leading the group.⁸² He led Charles and the others in devotional times, reading the Greek New Testament and Latin classics, sharing Holy Communion regularly and fasting twice a week. They worked to nurture their own souls, assist the poor and visit prisoners.⁸³ The nurture of the interior life found explicit expression in a ministry of openness and outreach. They ministered beyond themselves, to and with others.

Wesley's outreaching openness could be found in his use of open air preaching. The traditional way of preaching was to do so in the sanctuary and its confines. In fact,

⁸⁰ Walker, 454.

⁸¹ Tabraham, 12.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ John Munsey Turner, *John Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and the Rise of Methodism in England* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press), 25.

the tradition was to view outdoor preaching as infringing upon particular codes of behavior. Wesley and others dismissed this tradition. Wesley believed the mission meant doing what had to be done. This for him meant that violating standards of Anglican protocol, while never an easy or desired task, might be necessary to achieve missional purposes.⁸⁴

A further vehicle was the organization of the renewal movement into societies, classes and bands. Wesley found religious enthusiasm to be fleeting without structure. He led a systematic, orderly way for his followers to live and to behave in this ministry movement.⁸⁵ Offering a structured and zealous alternative and its impact on communities, Methodists met allegations and persecutions based on being outside the Anglican Church conventions and culture. According to Jon Munsey Turner, they were accused of having wild orgies. Their ministries were mischaracterized as vulgar and filthy. Further, because of attracting contributions, they were accused of robbing widows and, while Wesley has been characterized as one who adamantly believed and opposed evil spirits, they were still accused of witchcraft.⁸⁶

Wesley found not only accusations but also attacks. Latourette writes,

In the initial years of his itinerary, Wesley faced persecution. The emotion which his message aroused brought criticism, not only in the church circles and the upper classes where, under the influence of the current vogue of reason, any enthusiasm was looked at askance, but also among the masse. Sometimes Wesley was met by mobs and violence. Yet he never quailed nor was deterred by his mission.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Turner, 25.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 367.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 366-7.

⁸⁷ Latourette, 1026.

Wesley's mission of revival and transformation did not always bring comfort but it did offer needed change.

David Scott writes of how Wesley's antislavery efforts exemplify this:

One social position for which John Wesley is noted is his opposition to slavery. Central to this opposition is his 1774 pamphlet entitled *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. In this pamphlet, Wesley argues against the legitimacy and humaneness of the slave trade. He employs a variety of arguments and rhetorical strategies in the process. One particularly interesting strategy is the way in which he undermines traditional racial stereotypes.⁸⁸

Wesley acted in contradiction to many of the prevailing notions of his day to offer needed reform. Scott writes that Wesley not only opposed conventional images of blacks but went further to undermine "racial stereotypes by turning negative perceptions of blacks back upon those whites holding such views."⁸⁹ Scott holds that Blacks were viewed as pagan, unimaginative, constantly at war and unfeeling.⁹⁰ All of this was used to justify denying the humanity of Black people. Scott says that some did not view Blacks as human. They were seen as contemptible in appearance, subhuman, even as closer to apes-as a species-than to Whites.⁹¹

Wesley's stand against enslavement and these stereotypes can be seen particularly here. Scott writes:

[I]n Wesley's description of the conditions of slavery, we find further evidence that Wesley sought to overturn this stereotype. . . . "Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures in the visible world should live such a life as this?" If Africans are the noblest creatures in the visible world, then there can be no charge

⁸⁸ David Scott, "Racial Images in John Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery*," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 87.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 91-94. Brief refutations of each of these stereotypes, as well as some others, can be found on these pages by Wesley.

⁹¹ Ibid., 95.

that they possess a second-rate humanity. . . . Wesley notes with indignation that slaves are treated like beasts. That Wesley takes umbrage with such treatment demonstrates his rejection of the idea that blacks are comparable to beasts and thus may be treated in a like manner. . . . [I]n the prayer which concludes the work, Wesley refers to "every child of man" and "every man" in a way which includes blacks. Furthermore, he refers to slaves as "the work of [God's] hands, the purchase of [God's] Son's blood."⁹²

Thoughts Upon Slavery received strong responses, positive and negative, and thus provoked strong reaction. One unnamed reader is quoted to as saying "It probably exerted a greater influence upon the public conscience than any book ever written, not excepting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for the reception of which it prepared the way."⁹³ Yet, as Smith notes, "There was 'speedy and vindictive' opposition in Britain."⁹⁴ Not all were happy with his views and his articulation of them in the public arena. So it is that Wesley brought an experiential, theological and considered repudiation to views that were used to rationalize and justify enslavement. Offered by a follower of Jesus and leader of other such followers, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* brought changing impact on the issue of enslavement. It is an historic example of how confronting difficult issues can lead to transformative action through the church.

It may be that John Wesley's own experience with God beyond failure gave him the determination to lead others to persevere in hard times. After his return from a challenging and seeming failed mission in the Georgia colony, he experienced the well-documented Aldersgate event:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter

⁹² Scott, 95-6.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 89.

before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁹⁵

Because of this, he it can be argued that Wesley was seemed ready to lead Methodists to transformative action, to curtail or eradicate against issues such as enslavement, using methods of accountability and inculcation that seemed non-traditional at best. Essential to this was his organizing of the Methodists.

Wesley's structure of societies, classes and bands offered a manner, not only to counter a potential deficit in fervor, but also to enforce and re-enforce ideas for change. The Wesleyan societies organized to assist in "the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love."⁹⁶ These assemblies met once a week to pray, sing, study scripture, and to watch over one another in love. These times of fellowship built new followers and were places of inspiration and encouragement.

These were never intended to replace the churches. To the contrary, they were timed so as never to interfere with or be in competition with parish worship.⁹⁷ The Word and Sacraments as offered in the Anglican Church were always essential. John Wesley believed the sacraments offered by the church remained as valid means of grace and membership in the church were justified. Societies were places of gathering for renewal

⁹⁵ Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 280-281.

⁹⁶ "John Wesley's Three Strand Discipleship Process," accessed April 21, 2013, <http://coregroups.org/threestrandmodel.html>.

⁹⁷ Tabraham, 45.

of the people.⁹⁸ The discipline of the Methodists was to revive this faithfulness to the cause of Christ, not to start a new church. Societies meant only to build up those who claimed to follow Jesus. People could hear the word of God preached and be encouraged in the life of conviction, commitment and caring.⁹⁹

An interesting item that regularly occurred in the life of the Wesleyan Revival was the Love Feast. This meal recalled the many meals the gospels record Jesus sharing with his disciples: times of food, camaraderie, and community. This was not to be confused with the Lord's Supper in import or significance; however, it did have significance in its own right. Societies used it when an elder was not present to administer the sacrament. Any follower could lead it and it would usually include worship elements such as praise, testimony, songs, and prayers. It often included full meals and conversations about matters of Christian fellowship or concerns the members held in common.¹⁰⁰

Societies, joined with the innovation of open air preaching, supplied the membership for class meetings; that is to say, those who attended class meetings came from the Wesleyan societies. Class meetings were composed of twelve to twenty members, both sexes, mixed by age, social standing and spiritual readiness, under the direction of a trained leader. These were practical fellowship times to confess and account for sin, for growing in holiness. They provided added structure to more closely inspect the condition of the flock, to help through trials and temptations, and to bring

⁹⁸ Gonzalez, 283.

⁹⁹ The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 581-582.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 581-582.

further understanding in practical terms to the messages they had heard preached in society.¹⁰¹ Bands had four members, all the same sex, age, and marital status. They were voluntary cells of people who sought a deeper sense of holiness and love. The honesty was extreme and the expectations were high. These innovations were crucial responses to an era of change.¹⁰² Such organizational development offered even greater accountability towards living differently both within and without the church.

This organization made a difference according to Kevin Watson. He writes, “The society, class, and band structure was one of the major ways that Methodist movement was distinct from similar revivals of the time. For example, one of Wesley's chief rivals and friends, George Whitefield, famously lamented that he had ignored the need for a structure to undergird the movement he led: “My Brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand.”¹⁰³ In other words, Wesley’s desire to maintain transformation happened because of organization, strategy and intent. The capability to maintain focus, especially when problems ensued, was bolstered as deliberate methods for demonstrating a worship lifestyle in varied ways.

¹⁰¹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 72.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Kevin Watson, “The Form and Power of Godliness: Wesleyan Communal Discipline as Voluntary Suffering,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 168.

Impact on the Project Era and Considered Conclusions

Changing times call for changing tactics and strategies. The Wesleyan/Methodist movement demonstrates that the church can meet these times, seizing opportunities. The present era appears to offer opportunities reminiscent of the 18th century British context. The need for action to overcome the devaluation of people seems most appropriate. The necessity for a reinvigoration of followers of Jesus to live transformed lives to challenge this devaluation is essential, as this devaluation shows up in many ways. Economic concerns find the vast majority of human beings struggling to live. As seen in the England of the Industrial Revolution, disparities in access to health care, food, and water remain national and international scandals. The violence precipitated by survival issues and greed is a horrid by-product of all these issues. In the context for this project, racial concern intensified these matters. In America generally and in Nashville particularly, the violence of these finds particularly distressing import as intra-race hostilities can appear never ending.

Church indifference to these issues historically damaged the reputation and trust levels for the church. As then, today any hint of corruption and focus on material wealth almost demands insignificance among those who might benefit most by the ministry of the church. Large churches as profit centers have become a media promoted way of ecclesial life. The social values focused on production and economic advance has permeated the present day church.

Eddie Glaude caused a significant stir by his 2010 reflection on this. In an article entitled “The Black Church is Dead,” Glaude posits that the Black church principally has no impact on the pathologies that plague Black communities. He claims it is a shell of its

reputation. Citing unemployment, poverty, healthcare, rampant incarceration, home foreclosures, and a general sense of helplessness, he asks these questions: “what will be the role of prophetic black churches on the national stage under these conditions? Any church as an institution ought to call us to be our best selves—not to be slaves to doctrine or mere puppets for profit.”¹⁰⁴ Rare are the days, according to Glaude, when Black churches mobilize in public and together to call attention to the pressing issues of our day. There is no expectation and no evidence of it coming soon, where churches will gather to address concerns that cause oppression and injustice in the society.

Glaude’s critique offers a reminder of and connection to the Wesleyan era. A society in trouble needs a full worship that addresses—in prophetic, pastoral and revelatory fashion—the needs of the day with the presence and word of God. Several challenges seem to bear upon the present era. Overcoming a poor reputation may be the least of these. Gaining the inspiration and motivation to respond to devalued life, seen in epidemic violence, is one challenge. Another is deciding to strategize to address this issue. Yet another challenge is beginning to hear and understand the impact of the violence on persons, especially those most impacted.

However, as Wesley seems to have been called to do in his era, this situation offers a present day chance to view a problem as an opportunity. The issues of the age can also become chances for advances. Ken Bedell claims that the church exists today in forms that did not exist in its genesis. The church has transitioned and because it has done so, it maintains the capacity to fulfill its mission. Bedell writes:

¹⁰⁴ Eddie Glaude, “The Black Church Is Dead,” *Huffington Post*, accessed December 14, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html.

Each transitional period offers opportunities for the Christian church. The most important lesson we can learn from past transitions is that Christian people need to recognize that transitions offer special opportunity for faithful Christian discipleship”¹⁰⁵

The present era is another transitional period. Technologies, new economies and the new interdependence of nations make possible-if the church is faithful-new opportunities for making change and becoming a relevant witness in the world. Wesley met the transition with innovation, organization and missional focus.

However, these three foci are not merely meant to build an institution. Rivaling conspicuous consumption and international capitalism ought not be the goal of the church; perhaps it should not even be the byproduct. People need hope and freedom to be their best selves, to overcome threats that deny humanity, not simply to participate in moneymaking or in justifying commercial behaviors. When such happens, there is only confusion and ambiguity. The church is not authentic to its mission when it seems to mimic or rival corporations.

Instead, the church presents hope to survive the ambiguities of transition. It offers respite to persons ignored or abused by the systems seeking power and fortune. It is an alternative community and lifestyle that demonstrates a distinction from the profit making society that threatens to crush so many.¹⁰⁶ The mission of the church, making disciples of Jesus, values human beings as having sacred worth. Because certain transitions threaten these values, there is much more that the church can address if the church dares to be open to imaginings. The missional church offers worship that moves

¹⁰⁵ Ken Bedell, “The Christian Church’s Struggle to be Faithful,” *Religion Online*, March 3, 1998, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=192>.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

people to behave in ways that bring change. It is a church that dares to act and think in ways that free the surroundings to life.

Michelle Alexander gives notice that this era is fraught systemic social perils. She writes, “[T]he current system of control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy.”¹⁰⁷ The ways in which this happen are myriad: prisons bursting with inmates; the criminalizing of poverty, illiteracy and illness; second-class citizenship for persons who are released from prison after serving terms. Alexander goes on to say that America has an under-caste, “a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society . . . it creates and maintains a racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did.”¹⁰⁸ These perils enrich certain people at the expense of others. A new enslavement occurs, staggering the populace in untold ways. Yet, such staggering makes for widespread dread, fear and anger. Unemployment, homelessness, terrorism from law enforcement (legal gangs) and outlaws (criminalized gangs) all call for the compelling presence of the church.

Conclusions

This dilemma offers the opportunity for an active and activist church that believes in Jesus Christ to develop a liberated, liberating, liberation ministry. This kind of ministry can foster individual, community and world change. It can bring divinely inspired movement for transformation. Persons who desire to alter the economic, political and

¹⁰⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2010), 43.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 44.

educational conditions that attend now can find spirit and focus through worship that speaks to such ills and beyond. The physical, emotional and intellectual violence that tears communities up can be challenged. However, this challenge must be more than declared. Speaking beyond the ills comes in developing places and structures to hear the stories of those impacted by this violence. It continues by both announcing hope and opportunities to gather in smaller groups for encouragement and strategizing. This offers occasions to not only critique but to seek solutions, to develop responses that come from a faith that says this violence can be addressed, that change can happen and that transformation is possible.

Opportunities exist for transforming ministry through worship. The inspiration that fostered the organizing of societies towards personal and corporate accountability can make internal and external change, not only advancing the church but cultivating a new community as well. A people shaped by Word and Table, who embody the nurturing and nourishing fellowship with Jesus Christ and with one another, can be God's catalysts for new life. Strategic meetings, writings, planning sessions and executing the plans are ways in which worship can live through and beyond traditional worship settings. The Wesleyan movement of the eighteenth century shows this with its impact on the violence of enslavement. Violence of the present era, using worship and strategic variances of classes and bands, can offer the same kind of emancipating and transformative action. The Wesleyan movement demonstrates the mission minded church can indeed offer worship that generates change making action.

Theological Foundation

Table fellowship offers food for body and soul. In Jesus, the table fellowship of Word and Table offers freedom from physical hunger and from spiritual deprivation. This transformative liberation in missional churches makes for relevant ministry in for the particular context in which it congregations are located. This chapter section argues that worship of God offers nourishment and sustenance for transformative action in the world by investigating covenantal life with God by way of the gift of Jesus. This life finds a relationship with God that God initiates and pursues on behalf of humanity and by God's desire. Worship becomes a desired and understood obligation to because of the covenantal relationship. Further exploration will investigate a particular theology of worship as Word and Table. The importance of Jesus as Word-in scriptural revelation and in preaching-and the notion of this as essential to worship as well as the importance of the Eucharist will be discussed as a means of experiencing Jesus' presence according to a particular faith posture. Making worship into a way of life rather than an episodic, irregular event is both the ministry and theological objective. Seeing worship as God's nourishing and liberating activity, the section of chapter three offers conclusions relative to worship that inspires and motivates transformative action, on both a personal and corporate level.

Covenantal Life and the Worship Obligation

Covenantal relationship with God comes in the creation of a people according to Adrio König, out of the difference between God and human beings. Covenant exists as an unequal relationship between God and humanity. God is the creator. Humans are the

creatures. God pursues humans, determines the content of the covenant and decides on the obligations. This is because God seeks cherishing and intimate relationship with humanity. Humans need merely to be responsive to God's initiative¹⁰⁹. God made the whole of creation, and then remade humanity through the Christ event. Letty Mandeville Russell argues that "The ultimate meaning of liberation or evangelization is not determined, however, by one's perspective, be it feminist, black, Third World, or whatever. The meaning comes from the biblical story of what God is doing in bringing about New Creation in Jesus Christ. Yet that meaning must be interpreted in relation to our various 'worldviews' and 'church views.'"¹¹⁰ That divinity proactively moved to create then re-create is consequential for humanity. God chose to make people and to be in covenant. God makes allowance, by way of varied and particular worldviews, for the freedom and overcoming of struggles through this connection of the created and Creator.

Covenant appears then to be about God's unequivocal and affectionate behavior that invites humans to relationship with the divine and with one another.¹¹¹ Covenant speaks to God's proactive and intentional activity towards the created. Anne Primavesi and Jennifer Henderson suggests that covenant life with God extends an all-encompassing wide ranging assurance and promise that is never ending and all

¹⁰⁹ Adrio Konig "Covenant Partner and Image: Deriving Anthropology from the Doctrine of God," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 88 (September 1994): 36.

¹¹⁰ Letty Mandeville Russell, "Liberation and Evangelization : A Feminist Persepective," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2, no.4 (1978): 128.

¹¹¹ George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 723.

including.¹¹² This assertion suggests that God desires the inclusion of all. Tissa Balasuriya continues the notion that no station in life, no lack of pedigree nor any other thing separates anyone from God's embracing activity and affection. God's covenant comes from concern and love. This active and enthusiastic concern that, Balasuriya further asserts, comes out of God's deep interest for God's people. This committed interest has roots in the Hebrew Bible but finds its culmination, for Christian faith, in Jesus Christ.¹¹³ God acts for the development of human beings to build and strengthen them by this covenantal relationship.

People relating to each other are essential to the covenantal idea and central to the teaching of Jesus as he brings the new covenant. According to Barry Blackburn, the exile that the people of God experience will soon end. God brings the new covenant through Jesus by way of: 1) His baptizing with the Holy Spirit; 2) His defeat of Satan's temptation; and 3) His teaching.¹¹⁴ Critical to this teaching is how persons relate to God and to each other.

Blackburn asserts that the sum of the law for Jesus is to love God and one another. In making this claim, he discusses a sharp distinction between Jesus' teaching and the halakah of the Pharisees and the scribes. He writes of Jesus in Mark's gospel: "The

¹¹² Anne Primavesi and Jennifer Henderson, *Our God Has No Favorites: A Liberation Theology of the Eucharist* (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, Inc. 1989), 1.

¹¹³ Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 12.

¹¹⁴ Barry Blackburn, "Liberation, New Covenant, and Kingdom of God: A Soteriological Reading of the Gospel According to Mark," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 222-223.

content of Jesus' teaching might roughly be placed under three rubrics: 1) the correct way to understand and implement Israel's law; 2) the disclosure of apocalyptic secrets; and 3) fidelity to Jesus and his message as a means or condition of salvation, that is, entrance into the kingdom of God.¹¹⁵ As he clarifies this soteriological discussion, he writes: “With respect to the first, Jesus sums up the Law in its two most important commandments: love God and love your neighbor. However, at a number of points he rejects the *halakah* of the Pharisees and their scribes. He undoes the scribes by forgiving and healing a man who was paralyzed as punishment for his sin. (Mk 2:1-12). He eats with tax collectors (2:15-17), he discourages his disciples from regular fasting (Mk 2:18-20), he allows his disciples to shuck grain as they traverse a field on the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28), and on that holy day he does not hesitate to heal a man's withered hand (Mk 3:1-6). How sharply Jesus' teaching differs from that of the Pharisees and their scribes is the subject of much of chapter 7.”¹¹⁶

The pedagogy and practice of Jesus and halakah differs from that of the Pharisees and their scribes. Jesus' teaching claims and lives relational behavior between parties. Balasuriya's discussion of God's impartial and indiscriminate love through presence, as covenantal characteristic, and Blackburn's examples of Jesus' teaching and living a saving halakah, combine to offer a covenantal theology of access for all. This covenant can liberate from exile and discrimination by way of God's love, God's presence and God's expectation that, in obedience to the covenant, humans to be love God and each other in ways that nourish and build.

¹¹⁵ Blackburn, 223.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Such love purposes itself towards a comprehensive salvation. God shows up for human beings to be freed from any bondage that would hinder the divinely created manifestation for which they were made. According to James Cone, the covenant made and the revelation shown in Jesus Christ serves to unfetter a community from its oppression, wherever and however oppression presents itself.¹¹⁷ The Christ event did not happen simply to be with human beings. It is God in covenant with humanity to demonstrate what freedom is, to show people how to live with God and with each other. God comes in Jesus Christ—by spirit, by overcoming evil and by teaching—to build people by way of empowerment and to service. God comes to bring life giving deliverance in all areas of life.¹¹⁸

This deliverance is crucial because of sin. Gustavo Gutierrez posits that sin is a corporate concern, a historical, systemic reality of relational breaches among people. It is because of the collective actuality of sin that there are individual and personal manifestations of it. Sin is basic alienation among people which, therefore, is the root of unfairness and mistreatment.¹¹⁹ Sin shows up among individuals because sin exists in the structures, systems and processes of human relationships. By way of this understanding, sin breaches covenantal connections among persons. Abundant life becomes unfeasible as people exist in disagreement and disorder. In conflict with other humans as part of the creation people then find themselves out of order with God.

¹¹⁷ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 17-18.

¹¹⁸ Blackburn, 223.

¹¹⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 175.

Understanding sin as covenantal breach, for humanity to be in right relationship with itself and with God, covenant must be recalled. The freedom that exists when in proper relationship with God and others must become a priority and practice. This recollection of covenant and response to the Christ event can find its liberating power and purpose through the reestablished covenant in public worship. Valerie Bridgeman Davis calls worship “an encounter with a playful God in a playing creation.”¹²⁰ God experiences the adoration of people as the church expresses adulation and esteem. The church receives redemption, re-formation and deliverance as God manifests God’s self among the people.¹²¹ God allows humanity to enter into God’s presence. In so doing, people begin to be changed by the creative encounter. Covenant can hereby find reestablishment and, in and for a Christian context, thereby can give reinvigoration and empowerment.

Brent Peterson uses a Roman Catholic definition to express what worship is: “Roman Catholics have imagined Christian Worship as ‘the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity.’”¹²² Veneration of the Almighty uplifts and positively instigates God’s people as they seek the presence of the Creator. God’s love in worship radiates in and among the people, to each other and back to God.¹²³

Claiming worship as life means that all of life is sacred. It asserts that worship happens in every instance of life. All of life takes on critical importance and ultimate significance. The oppressive realities of day-to-day existence—racism, classism, sexism,

¹²⁰ Valerie Bridgeman Davis, “Go Play with God: Reclaiming Liturgy for Spiritual Formation,” in *Companion to the Africana Worship Book*, ed. Valerie Bridgeman Davis (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 27.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Brent D. Peterson, *Created to Worship* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 24.

¹²³ Ibid.

xenophobia, homophobia—do not stop persons from living. As Lisa Allen writes, “God can yet be worshipped because worship is more than now. Worship is an eschatological happening, faithfully assured that the God who delivered from enslaved Hebrews and from Egypt and Africans from the southern United States delivers now and will deliver beyond now. God can be trusted to save. Thus, God’s people worship.”¹²⁴ In other words, in all times and all circumstances humans can participate in covenantal, liberating activity by worship. Allen claims God can be trusted to love humans and empower humans in all situations because God transcends and can deliver from any situation.

This is especially true for those found in the vulnerable stations of life. Worshipping God in Jesus Christ finds a deliverance occurring as the weak are empowered. Jacqueline Grant offers a three dimensional significance for Jesus that she calls for particularly in its significance for Black women. Grant writes that “ first he identifies with the ‘little people,’ Black women, where they are; secondly, he affirms the basic humanity of these, ‘the least,’ and thirdly, he inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence.”¹²⁵ In other words, Jesus identifies with those considered little people, with their station in life by showing up as one of the little people. He affirms their basic identity as human beings, which is to say, he adds to his showing up by declaring that they are humans who have been created and loved by the Creator. Finally Jesus encourages a faith and life that is lived towards divinely endowed and empowered freedom-in this life.

¹²⁴ Lisa Allen, “In the Spirit,” in *Companion to the Africana Worship Book*, ed. Valerie Bridgeman Davis (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 109.

¹²⁵ Jacqueline Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 217.

Each instance of this adoration sets the followers of Jesus Christ apart, defines and distinguishes them in and through the covenant that they model in life.¹²⁶ These are set apart as liberators because of the love filled covenant. They become proclaimers and agents of freedom rendering love. The performance of this love in the public assembly of worship offers a covenantal reminder, “I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”¹²⁷ Worship then, as glorification of God and human sanctification, can take place with intent to address and form life. That is to say, worship can be more than perfunctory habit. It may be viewed as more than routine and customary convention alone, a human addiction to superior power out of fear or dread. Instead, it is a rehearsal for living abundantly in and amongst creation. The covenantal act of worship offers a transformative event and context that says who people are, what they aspire to and what/who they value.

Worship as Word and Table

This aspiration is about formation. Formation happens by Word. The Word is about the biblical text, about the Holy Scriptures but that is not the extent of its meaning. The Word, in its fullness, begins in Jesus the Christ. He is logos in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He is the one Revelation 19:13 discusses, saying, “[H]is name is called the Word of God.”¹²⁸ Jesus Christ is the Word. Worship forms people by way of Word with Jesus as

¹²⁶ Grant.

¹²⁷ Matthew 28:20b.

¹²⁸ Peterson, 102.

the clear focus. Understanding and receiving Jesus Christ as Word happens through the centrality of scripture. The Bible is the keystone for persons to receive the revelation of Jesus as the Christ of God. Its finite limitations give access to the eternal truth that is the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

According to Franklin Segler, reading the scriptures, and hearing them read in the worship context gives access of to the revealed Christ.¹²⁹ From this perspective, the bible offers disclosure of Jesus the Christ, speaking to his teachings on love of God and neighbor and the implications therein. Christopher R. J. Holmes writes,

Revelation is the history of Jesus Christ. It is “the conviction that the God of Israel has acted in a decisive way to deliver and redeem his lost creation,” negating ‘the things that are’ in order to bring into existence ‘the things that are not.’ This is ‘the great event of revelation,’ God’s reconstitution of his people Israel around his crucified and risen Son. This event, this happening is attested in Scripture. And Scripture is to be heard—interpreted, if you will—as the normative witness to this history.¹³⁰

In other words, scripture witnesses to God’s continued pursuit of covenantal relationship with humanity, and this culminates in Jesus Christ. The implications of the Christ event for humanity come first and foremost in the bible. Scripture is of crucial value in this regard.

Scriptural interpretation happens in the worship context by way of proclamation. Franklin Segler interprets Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, as saying that the Christian

¹²⁹ Franklin M. Segler, *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1967), 121.

¹³⁰ Christopher R. J. Holmes, “Revelation in the Present Tense: On Rethinking Theological Interpretation in the Light of the Prophetic Office of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 24.

congregation should never gather if there will not be a preached word.¹³¹ Preaching the Word, the eternal Word that is the Christ event, is crucial to Protestant faith.

Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon argues this as she quotes from a lecture from Dr. Isaac R. Clark, offering his homiletical definition: “preaching is divine activity wherein the Word of God is proclaimed or announced on contemporary issues for an ultimate response to our God.”¹³² Several ideas must be addressed here to explain the importance and the implications therein.

To say that preaching is divine activity is to say that God is the chief feature in the preaching event. Cannon clarifies that God does not need human assistance to preach. God guides and declares, choosing to use human beings to give voice but always able to preach without people.¹³³ The eternal God opts to utilize humans but is always the major contributor.

Cannon instructs that the term proclaimed has a literal meaning that assists the preaching moment and explanation. She writes, “The literal meaning of proclaimed is pro, a prefix meaning ‘for, in favor of, in behalf of,’ claim, the root meaning ‘to win or be the owner’. The implication of proclaimed or announced for us as ministers is that we are agents, stewards, representatives and care takers for the owner.”¹³⁴ Preaching happens for the prime mover, God, by the minor delivery servers, human beings. The proclamation comes on God’s behalf through God’s agents for God’s purpose.

¹³¹ Holmes, 127.

¹³² Katie Geneva Cannon, *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc. 2002), 42.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 44.

Discussing the content of the proclamation, the Word of God, Cannon writes that the Word is God as God-self, not the Bible alone.¹³⁵ This is not to say that the Scriptures are unimportant. The Bible clearly is the place of primary knowledge of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “I cannot expound the Scripture for others if I do not let it speak to me daily. I will misuse the Word in my office as preacher if I do not meditate upon it in prayer. If the Word has become empty for me in my daily administrations, if I no longer experience it, that proves I have not let the Word speak personally to me for a long time.”¹³⁶ It is to say that the Bible, in that it is a collection of written words written by people, inherently owns imperfections that come from that which has been offered, authored or inhabited by fallible creatures. Good News for imperfect humanity-divine grace and truth-can and only come from the perfect God.

Addressing the notion of contemporary issues as part of this definition is an assertion that the real life and relevant issues in the worship environment are addressed in preaching. Life- changing worship cannot only address ideas. In an essay called Honoring the Body, Stephanie Pausell writes that communal worship provides prospects to appreciate the body through the rites that intensify incidents of the self’s holiness in everyday life.¹³⁷ While her focus is on the physical body, the application to preaching as part of worship demonstrates connection Cannon’s explication of Clark as he discusses contemporary issues. Preaching addresses what happens in life, not thoughts or dreams

¹³⁵ Cannon, 46.

¹³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, trans. David Gracie (Cambridge, UK: Cowley Publications, 1986), 31.

¹³⁷ Stephanie Pausell, “Honoring the Body,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 26.

that have no relevance. Preaching makes admiration of God pertinent. It brings holiness to every day, work and play life.

Freedom happens when Word that addresses life now. God's Word does not stand over history in a detached fashion. JoAnne Marie Terrell's article, "10 Point Platform for a Womanist Agenda (What Womanists) Want," speaks to this need for relevance. She writes, "When we devalue the earth, when we despise others and when we deny others the right to live, be free and creatively express themselves, we dishonor that by which they and we ourselves 'live move and have our being.'"¹³⁸ Jesus Christ comes into life, challenging the devaluation of life and offering relationship that nourishes. He comes dealing with situations as they occur. The Word that is worthy of worship is so because it demands that the situations in life, such as Terrell discusses, are acknowledged, analyzed and addressed. Proclamation is immaterial without this. Liberation comes when current issues are addressed.

All of this happens for ultimate response. Cannon asserts in Clark's definition that a decision must be made. Clark believed that God's proclaimed word must be accepted or rejected. According to Cannon's use of Clark's definition for preaching, there is no neutral place, no middle-of-the-road, moderate posture. This measure of worship brings forth either a movement to greater worship and admiration or to rejection based on disapproval.¹³⁹

This definition finds affirmation as Peterson discusses preaching. The reading of the Bible and preaching call followers of Jesus to recognize the healing God has done.

¹³⁸ Jo Anne Marie Terrell, "10 Point Platform for a Womanist Agenda (What Womanists Want)," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, no. 3-4 (2004): 10.

¹³⁹ Cannon, 25.

Yet the community must also recognize that more healing is necessary. The love that the community testifies to and experiences must also offer hope that, as justice, it shall be experienced in and beyond the community.¹⁴⁰

Ultimate response to God, which will better the church and the world, means preaching that diagnoses and offers remedy. It does not ignore wrong. It calls wrong and invites right. It expects a love and justice that offers world change. As preaching expects alteration in life of some sort, it underlines the feature of liberation theology that may be most important. Liberation makes no separation between theology and ethics. To speak of God in a particular fashion requires behavior that comes out of such thinking. Robert McAfee Brown says that an extensively used biblical passage in Latin America is Jeremiah 22:13-17. The declaration of this text demonstrates an essential value for preaching: to truly know God is to behave justly.¹⁴¹

In this diagnosis and anticipation of justice preaching expresses hope by offering the gospel in places of despair. Such a diagnosis asserts that homiletics confront and offer remedy. In a word, preaching must be prophetic. J. Philip Wogaman claims that preaching that says people are valuable to God is not only prophetic, at times it may be controversial.¹⁴² On this point, Wogamon suggests that while the intent of the Word is to soothe, its confrontational character may cause discomfort. It witnesses to the grace and love of God as seen in the faith community, but also in the world beyond the

¹⁴⁰ Peterson, 108.

¹⁴¹ Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 66.

¹⁴² J. Philip Wogaman, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 8.

congregation. The grounding of the community finds one of its greatest aids in the preaching of the Word. People need to hear that they are important to God, that their lives mean something. Many times such a word is in fact controversial. For those who live on the margins of society to hear that God cherishes them-that Jesus Christ came for them and shows a way through and out for them-can be quite contentious indeed. Living in contexts of repression and systemic denial of worth, such preaching can indeed trouble and emancipate. It can afflict the comforted and comfort the afflicted when it dares to address its context.

From this perspective, preaching always encourages, however, it also challenges when necessary. To encourage does not mean that fault or sin remain undisclosed. These must be made known. It just cannot be that the wounds are exposed and never attended to. Preaching, therefore, always brings Good News. It just cannot ignore bad news in so doing. In "Preaching that Challenges Our Understanding of Church," Marvin McMickle argues "that the preacher must motivate the congregation to demonstrate an active interest in what is happening outside the doors of the church building."¹⁴³ That which stands in opposition to the will of God, which negates God's vision of love and justice for all cannot help but be revealed if worship is to be authentic. McMickle goes on to say, "It is not enough for a congregation to share in a worship experience, if it does not result in some ownership of the people and problems waiting just outside the door."¹⁴⁴ McMickle suggests here that the worship experience is one that engages in truth. It will not deny the contradictions that exist. The ownership he argues for implies that worship pronounces

¹⁴³ Marvin A. McMickle, "Preaching that Challenges Our Understanding of Church" *Living Pulpit* 9, no 4 (October-December, 2000): 38.

¹⁴⁴ McMickle.

what God wills to be. It offers the God gift of healing that seeks to gather persons and to make better the circumstances of all. Preaching then, can join all elements of worship to advance the covenantal healing of God's people by calling into account anything that contradicts the will of God. Simultaneously, preaching purposes to offer Good News antidotes that bring new persons into covenant and that deepen the resolve of those who have already committed to God in Jesus.

Seeking this healing for all means nurture and sustenance in preaching. So it is that Scripture and preaching-as Word-gathers worshippers to the Table of the Lord. It is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that implores humanity to come to a place of nurture and nourishment for the progress of God's Reign on earth. God offers grace in a celebration that guarantees a change for the better. Tissa Balasuriya claims that the Lord's Supper brought a challenging spiritual meaning to a festive meal, an event that commemorated Jewish liberation from enslavement in Egypt.¹⁴⁵ In so doing, Jesus essentially revised an occasion of festivity for the past and made it an everlasting instance for the present and for the future. The Lord's Supper serves as more than recollection of the death of Jesus. It is a particular means of grace to: represent human redemption, recall the suffering and death of Jesus Christ and demonstrate the love and union between Jesus and His followers.¹⁴⁶

How Jesus is present at the Lord's Table has been debated across the centuries. In what way or to what extent this presence is found should be less important than the faith gift that comes at the Table. Explaining this debate relative to presence, Peterson writes,

¹⁴⁵ Balasuriya, xi.

¹⁴⁶ *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, 68.

The Roman Catholic Church strongly affirms the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine. This affirmation is called transubstantiation. . . . (Martin) Luther asserted that Christ was bodily present in, with and under the bread and wine, a view that has been named consubstantiation. . . . Ulrich) Zwingli emphasized that as believers remember and commemorate Christ, such a disposition towards Christ offers a kind of spiritual formation in their lives.¹⁴⁷

Peterson extends the explanation of the debate by discussing the view of John and Charles Wesley, which he calls doxological agnosticism. He explains this as “affirmation that Christ is present and worthy to be praised (doxological) and, at the same time, remained in wonder and awe (agnostic) as to how Christ is present metaphysically.”¹⁴⁸

This brings forth the question as to whether Christ’s presence can be understood intellectually or if it needs to be known that way. Nathan D. Mitchell writes, “What is needed, Chauvet and Marion argue, is a new starting point in sacramental theology, and that starting-point must come from the data of revelation itself, from a paschal mystery than can be neither derived nor deduced from the metaphysics of presence and causality. That is why Jean-Luc Marion argues that “Easter innovates,” that it catapults us forward into a world “too new for us” — so new and unfamiliar, in fact, that we have to “relearn everything.” None of our former categories work.”¹⁴⁹ The understanding that is sought may be futile; it may even be unneeded.

Still, these debates have continued over many years. Persons have taken opposing views and attached themselves to various positions in various camps. However, as Peterson also writes, “Lost in the conversation is the gift command and promise of God

¹⁴⁷ Peterson, 176-77.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 177.

¹⁴⁹ Nathan D. Mitchell, “Mystery and Manners: Eucharist in Post-Modern Theology,” *Worship* 79, no. 2 (March 2005): 140.

to be present.”¹⁵⁰ Jesus the Christ is present and hosts humankind at His table. This is the declaration of the faithful. The community finds Jesus Christ present in the Lord’s Supper.¹⁵¹ The Church finds empowerment, comfort and courage in the Eucharistic presence of Jesus.

At the celebration of Holy Communion, the Church’s spiritual hunger and thirst find satisfaction. Jesus restores the lives of His followers with supernatural nourishment that invigorates and authorizes. This divine nutrition sanctions a required life of testimony as to the person and work of Jesus. That requirement is an acceptance of grace to model His love and to work for peace and justice in the earth.¹⁵² Those who sit at table with Jesus are expected to enter into lifestyles worthy of Him. Love of God translates to love of neighbor. Because of His presence at table, the community lives and loves differently than the world.

There is a grace practice in this living and loving that, by its very nature, demonstrates the covenant empowerment and distinction of Jesus and his followers. Quoting Kathryn Tanner, Stephen Edmonson says, “we best understand the relationship between Christ’s fellowship with sinners and his celebration of a final meal with his disciples not by rejecting the latter, but by holding the two together.”¹⁵³ There is a place for all who would receive the invitation. All can say no, but all receive the invitation.

¹⁵⁰ Peterson, 176.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² William B. McClain, “The African American Church and Sacraments: But Can We Still Get Our ‘Circament?’” in *Companion to the Africana Worship Book*, ed. Valerie Bridgeman Davis (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 74.

¹⁵³ Stephen Edmondson, “Opening the Table: The Body of Christ and God’s Prodigal Grace,” *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 2, (2009): 217-218.

Edmonson continues in his analysis of Tanner, writing “In Tanner's analysis of the relationship between Christ's presence at the Last Supper and his meal ministry, she points us to the primary theological principle underlying his action: the unconditional nature or prevenience of his love for his companions. In Christ's meal fellowship, Christ does not offer his presence as a blessing on the response of those with whom he dines, but rather as a catalyst for this response.”¹⁵⁴ Jesus loves humanity at the meal and the love is nourishment and empowerment that invites and can ignite loving response.

Particularly in the Black Church, this love practice of radical grace elicits celebration and expectancy at the Lord's Supper. The gift of Jesus' empowering presence through the storms of life into dignity and personhood compels joy filled gratitude. Praise filled thanksgiving emerges, even erupts, in receiving and accepting the grace it provides. As well, the Eucharist also elicits a daring hope, a belief that better days are ahead in this life and in the life to come because Jesus, the resurrected Christ, shows up at Holy Communion. This makes a life changing difference for the worshipper. There is anticipation of liberation, of justice that means a new future for the worshipping community and its environs. Jesus Christ came to earth for salvation, to save humans from sin, from sinning against one another, against themselves and against God.

A notion easily missed, according to Brent Peterson,¹⁵⁵ one that is essential to McClain and of critical import here, is the presence of the church to Jesus. The attendance of Christ as host establishes divine grace and power for the church. An experience of empowerment and mercy attends this grace filled meal and allows a new

¹⁵⁴ Edmondson, 218.

¹⁵⁵ Peterson, 179.

strength to those who attend the feast. Peterson argues “Too often when emphasizing how Christ is present, there is great neglect emphasizing *how* the church is to be present. For the church, being present is about humans being fully present to each other and to God.”¹⁵⁶ The attendance of the church as guest, committed to resurrection hope and power, makes incarnate that grace and power for the world. To rise from the table, to go then into the world, is to reenter the world transformed from when one first sat at table. The Word that is, was, and is to come, takes residence in the Body of Christ called the Church. This Church moves into the world making the same difference in the world that has been made by the Church’s own Word and Table experience.¹⁵⁷

This difference in the presence of the church to Jesus works for peace and justice on earth. The Holy Spirit, in covenant promise, attends to the church after the departure/ascension of Jesus. This promised presence allows the church to be present to Jesus in Eucharist as he is present to the church. This can be witnessed in the liturgy of the United Methodist Church. “Pour out your spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine, make them be for us the body of Christ that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.”¹⁵⁸ The presence of the church to Christ at the Eucharistic table is necessary for it to deliver its witness in the world. Deliverance becomes known to the world through the church as it personifies Jesus. The church demonstrates the reality of its worship as it leaves the table to serve the world with redeeming presence.

¹⁵⁶ Peterson, 179.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 12.

Holy Communion offers a power to the church that dwells inscrutably, beyond the human capacity to understand. The tragedy and anguish of the cross, remembered in the Eucharist, paradoxically becomes liberation and possibility especially to the oppressed.¹⁵⁹ The Word made flesh mysteriously moves among witnesses to bring holistic freedom. Cone writes, “Instead of attempting to explain the saving power of the cross rationally, Black Christians recognized it as a mystery, beyond human understanding or control.”¹⁶⁰ The mystery nourishes for empowerment and that empowerment need not be explained, only received.

The sacrament offers spiritual nutrition for the disciple of Jesus Christ who, as growth in grace happens, witnesses boldly with the song that says that there is ‘power, power, wonder working power in the precious blood of the lamb.’¹⁶¹ It cannot be explained from a rational perspective but it can be known and experienced through the mystery of faith.

As well, the presence of the church to Christ at the table makes for a service of thanksgiving¹⁶² that empowers for service in the world. Gratitude to the Christ who comes to be with the church makes a thanksgiving response that is articulated by mouth and by action. The availability at table moves the church to be available in the world. Worship as Word and sacrament then offers a model for ministry in the world. The lived covenant between God and people announces and teaches identity and activity.

¹⁵⁹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 73.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹⁶¹ Delores Carpenter, ed., *African American Hymnal* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001), 258.

¹⁶² Peterson, 179.

Nourishment that strengthens and nurtures emboldens the worshippers for behaving as agents and heralds of God's salvation.

Worship as a Way of Life Toward Liberation

The Christian congregation that has renewed its covenant with God through worship stands in the position to move from the assembly for celebration to activity for transformation. This project concentrates on how reverence of God—by way of ritual and gathering—can cultivate life-changing behaviors because of undertaking public problems and necessities. The import of this is the interruption of environmental pains and the development of divine, life affirming options for the community. The covenantal expression of worship, demanding that adoration is reflected beyond the sanctuary and its rites, lives in the places and spaces occupied by worshippers as they live their regular lives. The church at worship thus takes on a meaning well beyond the numbers attracted to the safe haven on Sunday. Worship has now become the lifestyle and disciplined comportment of the worshippers in everyday living. Worship has moved beyond a set aside fraction of one set aside day to perform for God. It can become a catalyst for living the covenantal call to daily discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ.

This covenant offers the experience of the created acting in response to the Creator, to the One who makes humanity out of affection and concern. The covenant embraces all; no one stands outside of its possibility for embrace and care. This covenant finds its culmination in Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus by way of Scripture and preaching, the congregation in covenant can embolden its people to take ownership for the surrounding community, calling forth response to the needs and concerns of people. Such

response can motivate the people towards the freedom that allows persons to be the best individuals and community possible by offering comfort and critique as needed.

Empowered further by the sacramental and symbolic meals of Holy Communion and the Love Feast, an empowered faith can offer a spiritual nutrition for both imagination and memory, crucial entities for transformative action. People possessed with resurrection faith and profound commitment to God and each other can believe boundless possibilities. Such belief can change lives and communities. So it is that worship rituals can gain fresh significance and vitality when the church answers God's call to ministry in the world.

It is here, when liturgy as the work of the people becomes a creative encounter to know and God's will, that the church is then able to re-present that will in the world as followers of Jesus. Representing Jesus Christ for the world makes the valuing of God that the church claims tangible, palpable and meaningful for others. Peterson says, "Worship must be about capturing people with the story and imagination of the Kingdom of God."¹⁶³ It is about moving people into new opportunities, innovative prospects and fresh faith that makes living consequential. Worship can move people into a community, fraught with poverty and violence for example, and offer creative responses that make for diminishing if not ceasing of these situations. This kind of worship can offer persons the opportunity to bring forth their divine, best selves.

True worship celebration leads to behavior that brings change. Those who encounter Jesus Christ can find ability to inhabit their surroundings in ways and in manners that prove the liberating power and presence of the God they serve. Such worship can make love its aim, justice its standard and grace the vehicle-not merely the

¹⁶³ Peterson, 26.

idea-that manifests a difference in the world. When Word and Table are inhabited by Jesus the Christ, they invite new ways of sharing and living, of thinking and being. All these invite and evoke individual and corporate change. Such change can transform communities. It is this kind of worship, moving towards transformative action, for which this project aims. Worship can indeed nourish and sustain disciples of Jesus for transformative service in the world. Establishing covenantal life in Jesus, by Word and Table people are empowered to act freely as God's vehicles of change in the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Project Purpose

This project is intended to describe how a worshipping community can respond positively and practically to the social ills in their neighborhood, particularly the issue of Black male violence which was evidenced in three specific local murders. The Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church (GMUMC), a staple of North Nashville religious life, was known and noted for its intimate involvement in the civil rights movement. Identity as a church that opened its doors for mass meetings, strategy sessions and tactic rehearsals as response to social issues remains a part of its history.

With this in mind, this project was intended, in part, to recount the sentiments of family and friends directly influenced by specific incidents of violence in the neighborhood of the church, as well as feelings from the congregation. It seeks to enlist ideas and document beliefs about curtailing violence, especially among Black males. The listening happens in an effort to extract possible responses to this kind of violence. The challenge and inquiry this project proposes is that Word and Table potentially can offer both remedy and support to reduce the violence attacking and hampering the community. The goals are to: hear stories connected to the issue; build a core group to lead strategic responses; increase responses that can assist in curtailing this kind of violence in North

Nashville. This project is meant to deal with the violence in the community by garnering information and knowledge from these particular instances. It considers how worship celebrations might become listening places as well as catalysts for transformational action. It is about moving persons from meaningful worship celebration (inclusive of preaching, sacrament of Holy Communion, ritual, lament, confession and petition) to worship service (seeking to impact change in the community by gathering for inspiration, release of anguish, reception of healing, motivation to plan strategies and tactics).

Research Methods Employed

This project utilized qualitative methods for investigating questions relative to the topic. The research focused on: 1) worship celebrations; 2) media outlets; 3) interviews with individuals; and 4) focus group(s). These four methods were to: 1) address the need to hear lamentations and to understand God's presence relative to the deaths; 2) examine news sources as they offered information about the incidents; 3) investigate how persons, with varying connections to the deceased, felt after the violence; and 4) seek possible responses to alleviate the conditions that caused this violence.

Worship celebrations were to offer praise and lament, confession and assurance. These were to hear testimonies about incidents and to hear—in raw and uncensored terms—how the witnesses felt, what they thought and anything else they wished to share. The songs, scriptures and sermon were to invite God's presence and power. They were to offer openness and possibly spiritual salve to hurting people. Four celebrations were planned to give opportunities to see and to hear from person in the liturgical setting of the GMUMC sanctuary and in the communion setting of a full meal in a fellowship hall.

Media outlets were explored for what they said about the incidents, what they did not say about them and for how long these stories remained topics in the news. News sources were reviewed to see if they were places where facts were reported or simply where opinions were shared. They could share details of the incidents or they might present the prevailing sentiments of the larger community towards this section of the city. Television reports, web sites and newspaper articles were reviewed for this method of information gathering.

Interviews were executed with persons of various connections to violence. Family members, close friends and relatively detached persons were questioned. These surveys sought a broad perspective of what these and similar hostilities meant, where they might come from and to discuss whether or not the interviewees believed there was hope to end the aggressions. The twelve persons interviewed offered this broad range, from community leaders to formerly homeless members of the community.

The focus groups were times to gather persons from the community, other organizations, GMUMC and from the universities to confront various questions but from a perspective of seeking solutions. The person gathered were called to inspect the questions that one-on-ones addressed but with the mindset that there expertise, experiences and their pain could allow possibilities for reclamation of life to emerge. Instead of the aggressions that make for community death-styles, these groups gathered to discuss transformation into lifestyles. The intent was to begin to form programmatic responses of collaboration and cooperation.

The objectives for all this were as follows:

1. To demonstrate that vital worship does not have to exist as an end unto itself. When issues of the community are known, the church can be inspired and informed by Word and Table to bring spiritual power to bear.
2. To establish that relationships built by communing with one another over a meal can indeed foster the kind of trust that makes healing from hurt possible and partnerships that make effective responses to inhumaneness a tangible reality.
3. To offer safe places for persons to share their truths, vent frustrations and experience new visions despite of and in addition to the traumas they have suffered.
4. To inspect views of the community and the incidents that occur for the purpose of seeing how accurate they are and to offer added views or alternative views.

CHAPTER FIVE

FIELD EXPERIENCE

The project focuses on showing that, through celebrating worship in the sanctuary with the intent of serving in the world because of worship, a congregation can have transformative impact upon issues that adversely affect its community. In its history, GMUMC exemplified firsthand and crucial contributions to the civil rights movement. As a church that opened its doors for mass meetings, strategy sessions and tactic rehearsals, response to social issues remains a part of its history. With this in mind, this project is intended to offer a place to address the virulent social concern of Black violence after listening to particular accounts. To do so called for making a worship space where persons could recount their sentiments as directly influenced by these violent incidents. GMUMC members were also to experience the sharing of feelings and thoughts. It seeks to enlist ideas and document beliefs about curtailing violence, especially among Black males. The listening happens in an effort to extract possible responses to this kind of violence.

Contextual Information

GMUMC chose to build its ministry center in the very neighborhood where the ministry began. This was a mission commitment to stay, thus the worshipping community

finds itself in the very center of the struggles that have become lethal aggressions in the neighborhood. Even with most members commuting, because of keeping its ministry building in the community, GGMUMC is affected by what happens. GMUMC's response of opening doors for these the funerals of murdered Black men has resulted in a renewed and reconstituted reputation as a place where the disenfranchised and the disinherited are yet welcome. Albeit a predominantly blue-collar congregation during the 1950's and 1960's, Gordon had a contingent of members who were credentialed educationally and economically. These members were a part of a different social economic class than many other Gordon members. As leaders—actual and perceived—in the community and in the church, the congregation developed a reputation of being somewhat exclusive. As such, there were neighborhood people, particularly from the low-income projects, who believed that GMUMC was not a place where they could belong. The perception of GMUMC as a church where the un-credentialed were not welcome prevailed. Persons among the in-fact disenfranchised and the de-facto disenfranchised—such as John Anderson, Keith Caldwell and Wayne Love—testify that they were shunned and mocked for even walking by the church building. They even suggest members that entering the building seemed to open them to the possibility to even more ridicule. So it is that they stayed away.

While some of this characterization ostensibly lingers, another estimation emerged from the hospitality offered through these funerals. The opinion of Gordon as a congregation open to all people, no matter the station in life, has seemed to increase. The congregation's standing among many who might never have felt welcome before began to change. Gordon's reputation as a somewhat elitist and constrained congregation found

a significant challenge and alteration as persons who rarely step into church buildings came to lament deaths and celebrate the lives of those who had been killed.

Results of Methods

Influenced by the mass meetings so effectively used during the Civil Rights Movement, a series of worship celebrations beyond Gordon's usual services were to be used. This was done to keep with the idea of the church as a catalyst for change through the empowerment of the gathered community at worship and to hear how addressing these issues with focus might spawn ministry to address the issue. These worship times sought to honor and seek God's presence in spite of these specific deaths, to understand the effects of these murders and to give voice to what happened and to visions/ideas that might address the problems will help discern commitments and directions from persons.

Worship celebrations were comprised of Word and Table. The proclamation of Word happened in the sanctuary. Each celebration was video-taped and available for sharing. The gatherings also included congregational singing, testimonies and prayer. The services were a special means of reaching out to persons who had interest in the effect by these deaths. They were persons who volunteered to be present out of familial relationship, friendship, congregational membership or curiosity. With the notable exceptions of those who were relatives of the murder victims, all who attended came because of church announcements, in the church bulletin or hearing the announcement verbally. Some also attended because of personal invitations.

After worship, sharing meals happened in a less formal and ritualized setting. Unrecorded and unconventional, Holy Communion was not observed in the ritualistic

manner as usually happens in the church. Rather, it was the actual sharing of a meal in one of the fellowship halls. This connection to early church practices, the genesis of the Eucharist, happened because of the assumption that as persons make connections during a meal—getting to know one another, sharing life and developing relationships needed for trust—God moves among them in God’s way for the purposes that God has. The crucial nature of sharing food together is both an explicit and implicit opportunity to share life together. That is to say, as persons physically share in nourishment for the sustenance of life, there is the prospect that they may also reveal more of their lives to one another, that they might use opportunities like this to more fully to participate in life together. Revealing one’s self—gains and losses, healing and hurts—frees persons to see and accept the possibilities that God has ready for them. In this particular case, God’s possibility of impacting the violence hampering and assailing the community of violence could become more real as persons gathered to share life in food and in conversation.

The explicit goal of worshipping through Word and Table was for God’s healing and inspiration to find ways to change the environment. As part of the worship, although divorced from the worship service by way of location, it was hoped that the mealtime would become a spiritual time that cemented the commitment and fomented the strategies to become God’s agents of change. There were later focus groups for strategizing. The prospect of these groups was to hear one another and to develop responses based on what had been heard, especially from testimonies in the celebrations.

Witnesses at the celebrations of worship made for interesting opportunities to hear celebration, lament, the call to action and the call to praise. A cousin to one of the murder victims spoke of the unwarranted speculation about one victim’s death. She spoke

of how the loss was a family and community tragedy. She offered a significant challenge relative to the murders by saying that conversation was good, but how much more necessary action was; she said, “We need to stop talking about it and start being about it.” Said differently, the conversations needed to point to and result in action. Another witness, in speaking to the death of another victim, said that he had had his share of trouble and was gunned down as he sought to make a better life for himself beyond jail and other challenges he encountered. With a legitimate business, he was—at least for now—inexplicably killed.

There were other witnesses who shared about deaths beyond these three. One lost a relative, in another state, to murder in a case of mistaken identity. One person spoke of the toll a murder is taking even now some years later. This person shared that several other persons connected to her family (the actual number was not clear) had been killed by violent acts. Other witnesses discussed violent deaths in varied ways. A final witness spoke with deep remorse about the death of his child while he was incarcerated. Sharing the pain and grief of this loss, the parent was almost inconsolable.

Several of these witnesses demonstrated the need for lament in the life of the church. What attendees said, over and over again, was that there were no places or spaces to share pain. The anguish shared caused tears and sadness. The mother of a murder victim talked of how persons tell her she should get on with life, telling her that she can get over it. She asked a pertinent and crucial question: how does one get over the death of a child, especially the unexplained murder of her child? She described the pain as indescribable.

These worship experiences, which allowed for testimony and confession, made a place for lamentation. The preaching in these moments, although brief, attempted to acknowledge the expressed anguish. This preaching happened to connect the laments—not merely to an empty praise that ignored pain—but to assert that in Jesus, God speaks radically to pain. The attempt was to show that praise and worship eventuate in assurance that God is not only present but active in resolving the sources of pain by speaking to the anguish of the cross and of Jesus Christ. Luke Powery writes, “Preaching, therefore, that is supposed to be in the Spirit cries out from this tree, for the way to the cross is the way the Spirit leads Jesus. The Spirit accompanies Jesus in his suffering. In Jesus' very own weakness, persecution, pain, and groans, the Spirit resides and even laments.”¹

The entirety of worship at GMUMC, including the preaching moment, sought to honor laments. It was to declare that there was wrong that happened. Powery writes, “Lament is the foundation for celebration. One cannot truly reach the height of celebration in preaching until one plunges to the depth of lament. Foremost in sermonic lament is the . . . naming of the human reality of pain concretely, whether it is individual (grace), communal (unity), or social (fellowship). The preacher asserts that in some area of life, things are not right.”²

Again, the preaching moment at GMUMC sought to name the distress. As it did so, it did not claim to have answers, solutions or to blame anyone for not having such. It did attempt to say that the God who made the victims was not pleased. As Powery further, writes, “In the naming of human reality, the . . . mode of lament language is not usually

¹ Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), Kindle Locations 916-917, Kindle Edition.

² Ibid., Kindle Locations 2962-2965.

indicative but imperative and direct, which is another mark of lament in preaching.”³ In other words, the preaching moment helped worship to further express the hurt and anguish in declarative terms. It went on to state that in the event of Jesus’ death and resurrection, God offered overcoming hope and invited persons to consider how they might assist the church in seeking solutions.

The acknowledging of this pain, of its causes and of the power that faith in Jesus Christ can lead to solutions was the critical point of the preaching. That which is lamented, which finds persons fettered to grief and hurt can be overcome. Liberation beyond mourning does come in Jesus. This liberation comes by the power of God and is empowerment to address the causes of pain and remorse. Attendees were thus invited to participate in ways that change might happen. Moving from the invitation toward considering working solutions, persons were invited to commune together over a meal as Jesus invited his disciples at the Last Supper.

As these issues had not been (or rarely been) discussed before, the communion meals helped the testimonies, songs and sermons to continue as conversations. While indeed festive—as communal meals are by nature—these meals after laments and preaching made for occasion to have further conversations. They were opportunities to smile, to laugh and to be comforted. The mourning continued but there was also the sharing of joy and celebration of memories. In these moments persons began to know each other differently. Because there was conversation about the testimonies of loss and grief, a depth of self-disclosure began that had not been known or noted before. This would prove to be essential learning as movement to transformative action occurred.

³ Powery, *Kindle Locations* 2978-2979.

Media

Media coverage happened almost immediately in these cases. The views of these deaths on a large scale could have impact on what persons knew or did not know, what was said or not said in response. Limited by time and attention, the views offered did speak to how persons responded or how they did not respond. In the instance of Johnathan Johnson's murder, he was shot at about 6:40 AM. He was pronounced dead at 7:20 AM. By 8:30 AM, media representatives were at the scene. An initial media report speculated that this death was gang related.

Metro Police said Thursday evening the shooting could be gang related, though Johnson's family said he was not gang affiliated. It is possible [Eric] Goodner has gang ties. . . . Metro Police started its gang unit in 2004 to combat gang activity in Davidson County. Sergeant Gary Kemper led the unit . . . "When we started it back in '04 we didn't know a whole lot so it took a few years to develop our knowledge of what was going on in the streets," he said. "As we went on we built a good base of information as a police department which helped us ID these gang members."⁴

Media coverage focused on the alleged murderer. An example is the 15 April press release and story, four days later:

A concerned North Nashville citizen today posted a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest of 17-year-old murder suspect Eric L. Goodner. The citizen, who wishes to remain anonymous, came forward wanting to assist the police department in bringing Goodner to justice. The \$500 is in addition to the reward (up to \$1,000) being offered by Nashville Crime Stoppers.⁵

The media seemed to concentrate its coverage on what happened to the alleged assailants. Convictions, felonies, troubles and issues were described and elucidated. The hurt and loss were rarely discussed.

⁴ "Pearl Cohn H.S. Shooting Victim Dies, Suspect at Large," WKRN.COM, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://wkrn.membercenter.worldnow.com/story/21940688/10th-shooting>.

⁵ "1 Dead, 2 Injured in Gang Shoot Out in North Nashville," WKRN.COM, accessed November 14, 2014, <http://www.wkrn.com/story/15061563/metro-police-investigate-shooting-near-hadley-park>.

This also connects to the coverage of the Clarence Claybrooks and McKinley Martin murders. The following was in the news concerning Claybrooks' death:

One person was killed and two others injured in a gang shootout Monday afternoon in north Nashville . . . Metro police told Nashville's News 2 rival gang members in two separate vehicles opened fire on each other. Officers said a large number of shots were fired, many from assault-type weapons. . . . Convicted felon Clarence Claybrooks, 33, was fatally injured in the incident.⁶

At Martin's death this was reported:

Police say Holland pulled up in an SUV and asked about the price of a wash. While the men were conversing, Holland allegedly shot Martin and fled the scene. Holland was arrested Friday at his home on 7th Avenue North. The suspected SUV was spotted in the driveway. At the time of the shooting, Holland was on probation for a voluntary manslaughter conviction in which he shot and killed a man at North 2nd Street and Richardson Avenue in October 2003. He had been sentenced to eight years in prison.⁷

After reporting on the deaths almost all television features, as well as headlines on newspapers and Internet, focused on the shooters and their place in the judicial/law enforcement system. The attackers and their pasts were the news subjects. How this could or would end in the neighborhood was not addressed much, if at all. News media made reports but these were largely selective and, where there was interpretation, it was of the problems rather than any solutions.

Investigation into the lives of the victims, into the lives of the shooters and into what may have caused the violent behavior did not occur much, if at all. This is illustrated by reports on Eric Goodner.

A Department of Children's Services caseworker warned a juvenile judge that Eric Goodner was a "danger to others" nearly a month before police say he shot and killed a fellow Pearl-Cohn High School student at a school bus stop. . . .

⁶ "1 Dead, 2 Injured," WKRN.COM.

⁷ "Man Arrested in Fatal Shooting at North Nashville Mobile Carwash," WSMV.COM, accessed November 14, 2014, <http://www.wsmv.com/story/15591997/man-arrested#ixzz3VswovosS>.

Court records indicate state workers were well-acquainted with Goodner, who had been sent to DCS facilities three times before last being released in December 2012 into a DCS aftercare program. They show there was at least a six-week lag between when Goodner went missing while under DCS supervision and when a caseworker requested an arrest warrant.⁸

Documents confirm the alleged shooter had consistent difficulties in school and with law enforcement. The idea that Goodner posed a problem was stated clearly.

And they present a conflicting picture as to how dangerous DCS thought he was, with a caseworker indicating he was dangerous on one court form, but elsewhere leaving blank a check box that asks if the person might present a danger to the community. . . .⁹

Media reporting tells what happened in these instances. However, the reports discuss only what happened. They give passing attention to how these murders occur and even less attention to why.

Interviews with Individuals

Several persons shared their perceptions about these murders and neighborhood murders in general. Individual interviews were held with several persons. These begin to give distinct insight into what has happened—at least in the neighborhood and according to those impacted—in specific murders and the general climate that fosters these violent deaths. They give insight into what persons believe can and should happen that, at least in some ways, begin to attempt to comprehend what these all mean. These were held by phone, by email correspondence or in person.

⁸ Brian Haas, “DCS Warned Judge that Teen Tied to Bus-stop Shooting was 'Danger to Others,’” *Tennessean.com*, accessed November 14, 2014, <http://www.tennessean.com/article/20130602/NEWS01/306020067/DCS-warned-judge-teen-tied-bus-stop-shooting-danger-others>.

⁹ Ibid.

From the perspective of these interview questions/surveys, the prevalence of violence comes from issues of economics and education. Illegal drugs fuel an underground economy that demands intimidation and force to maintain success. Violence becomes normative and almost necessary. Abuse seems to happen in many forms. Dealers in drugs take advantage of the economically deprived environment with money, intimidation and weapons—especially guns. Neighbors take advantage of addicted persons by using them for cheap labor. Police frequent this context and—while viewed as a necessary presence to make a positive difference—are paradoxically viewed as taking advantage of this crime-harvesting environment to fill jails with the unemployed and/or addicted. The lack of money and credentials continues a cycle of devalued life and living, a context where well-meaning and aspiring people can become involved—because of a lack of money—in criminal lifestyles.

Feelings about the losses of life ranged from articulated immunity to devastation. Such violence has become such a part of the community that responders claimed not to think about it much, if at all. It has become expected because of a lifestyle viewed as selfish and greed driven. This lifestyle is viewed more as a death-style. The possibility of more money brings with it the probability of early and/or violent death. Viewed as a tough life, several of the interviewed persons felt hurt over how many innocent people are impacted and changed by their response to economic need. Children lose parents to jail, death or addiction. Parents lose the time to enjoy and offer positive impact to their children. Persons of all ages and stage in life can be killed or have someone close die. For some, the economic and survivalist reality means simply that income was cut off and, as such, demands other means of finding money.

These deaths impacted or disrupted lives in varying ways. One of the respondents articulated this as a generational issue, believing this violence to be part and parcel of this era in history. Some respondents agreed, believing that music and other media entertainment contributed to it and thus impact was almost ubiquitous. For them, his death style permeates all aspects of life in the community. The loss of life, especially of young men, made for the sense that this would negatively impact the community and impair some prospects for young families to want to live in the environment.

Persons of varying relationships to murdered persons—best friend, fiancée, niece, lover and godmother—all were found quite distraught. One child whose parent was murdered was described as quiet and—because the parent/child relationship was mostly material—did not share or seem to have much to say about much as to hurt or grief. This was considered pain that perhaps could not be expressed. A best friend was deeply hurt but almost gladdened because it got him and the murder victim out of the drug business. This victim became a Robin Hood of sorts. He provided much for the living of several households. This friend did not desire to approach that kind of business connection. Thus, for some it might be said the disruption was beneficial.

Some friends became closer because of the deaths. A quote from one person was, “You can almost feel the love for one another in the air.” As well, however, the pain caused some to desire revenge and retaliation. The impact came in not understanding why such death had to happen. As such, there was the desire to avenge the murder. With this feeling came the sense of being, “Absolutely shocked, disbelief, heavy hearted, physically sick, uncontrollable crying, feeling of a great loss, flood of memories,”

“... sick, uncontrollable crying, floods of memories, the last time I saw him, what could’ve been. . . .”

Life disruption questions assumed that there was a sense in which these deaths unsettled or disordered respondents. There was the sense that disruption was a fact of life for this group. One person called it “generational and family craziness.” There was also the sense that this kind of violence was only somewhat contained. Disruption could move across the city because of what another respondent called “mobile and nomadic violence.” In other words, this kind of interruption moved across neighborhoods and the city; disruption could be seen and sought almost anywhere in town.

Assisting family members and friends through this came in multiple ways. One person spoke of simply watching children to assure they were all right; thus far, the kids seem to be fine. Others helped out by serving as surrogates to community organizations and events. Others just discipline themselves to be in touch with those most immediately affected by the murders. There were some others who, while not being engaged for assistance, still make themselves available when a need is seen or spoken.

When asked what reasons might there have been to expect this kind of violent death, some were very clear about that murder was to be expected. Living a life in the street was discussed as a recipe for a short life. Making a career of drugs and guns made violent death a continual possibility. So it was that some assumed this would happen. When persons are involved and seem to enjoy their involvement, then there is always the chance that what they enjoy will kill them. An economic system that had low investments and high profits, and that used fear and coercion as tools of the trade, attracted aggression and death. However, when a child is murdered going to school, or when a man is killed

headed to work, there were no answers about expecting such deaths. There is no way to expect persons not involved in criminal activity, or that those who had walked away from crime, would yet be targets for such terror. Add to this the opinion and experience that this area had been a haven for many in years past, that it was a place of uplift and overcoming, there are those who remained stunned that such happens. The crime and poverty explain why, but the feelings that this was a safe community remain so that some are still shocked by such.

Questions as to how one might have prevented these deaths, and if so how brought about feelings from a few who believed a phone call or a conversation might have changed what occurred. There was the sense that a phone call might have offered distraction or a time of conversation might have allowed for sharing that could have changed the outcome. Others felt that only peers could address or change this. One respondent believed he was too old to offer benefit here. Churches were mentioned here as a place of outreach that might offer alternatives.

Such violence is prevalent in our community because the people who live in the community, and want change, feel unable to make change. The violence continues because poverty is deeply rooted in the community. One responder mentioned that programs like CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) are not present in the community in the same ways as before. This person believed that the sole reason for crime in the neighborhood is poverty. The prominence of gangs, the infiltration of drugs and the money that comes with them make some boys feel they are men before their time.

The economic conditions find young men making decisions and playing roles for which they have not been prepared. Estimates from responders relative to this kind of

loss were staggering. Admittedly, no one said they knew for sure but the estimates were from 60%-100%. The sense that this would only continue without community involvement was a consensus view. There was also the belief, and the hope, that local churches with preventative programs might indeed have a positive impact.

Support from community organization and institution was viewed as having varied degrees of accomplishment and presence. The police department victims' advocates are viewed as somewhat helpful. They assured free counseling and psychological support. The media showed up to help perpetrators to be found. They even demonstrated familial and personal compassion. Churches were viewed as present only for a moment. This surrender may happen because, in the words of one responder, "The problem is too deep."

While schools, teachers and churches have offered some help, there is so much to respond to that even institutions become overwhelmed. Partners in the Struggle (PITS) was mentioned for creating space for families to meet who had lost loved ones. Gordon church was mentioned for being open to funerals, for special services viewed as forums and along with other organizations there were places that allowed person who had experienced the same type of tragedy to support each other.

When asked what people, organizations, institutions might have done—or could do—to better the circumstances, one responder suggested that all that can be done is to reach out and support those who have experienced these losses. Support mechanisms could be put in place to prevent future incidents. In support of this idea, a responder said that there was nothing that was not done, that even the media was helpful with words of comfort, prayers, food as well as monetary donations. One suggested that the problems

are so massive and complicated that breaking down the problem into pieces, seeing the best angles to start, and then addressing these piecemeal is the best answer.

Generational concerns were lifted as the poverty and drug addiction can impact as many as four generations in a family. Another view was that no organizations were assistive, but that churches could offer special opportunities. Churches could develop an event across denominational lines, giving young people positive options and opportunities. Other suggestions included: reaching out and embracing persons, treating all with respect; targeting parents for education. Other suggestions included: reaching out and embracing persons, treating all with respect; targeting parents for education.

A final question undertook to determine what message persons might have for others who have experienced a similar loss. Responses were:

- “God will see you through it. Some days are harder than others.”
- “Invest in children to keep them from same outcome.”
- “Pray, pray and when you feel all prayed out, pray some more! He’s with you in your darkest hour!”
- “Hold onto Gods unchanging hand!”
- “No idea what to say. Just a part of life and lifestyles.”
- “Don’t let deaths be in vain. Stop folk from going down this road.”
- “Education. Remember death is painful.”
- “Parent your children and get them involved in meaningful activities so they can understand that they have choices for more reaching than things of the street.”
- “Pray for next family, for the killers in and out of institutions.”

Finally, one interview subject knew the youngest man who was convicted of one of these murders. As this person discussed the young man, the implications became clear

concerning what poverty and the subsequent lack of education force on many. This person recalls that relatives of the young man spent significant time in jail. Their troubles with law enforcement and the legal system seemed constant; thus, such issues became a part of day-to-day life for this eighteen year old boy. Gang membership also gave him both confidence and street status. This person affirmed that gangs offer protection, money, food, shelter and family. In a context of poverty and lack, all of these are essential for survival. Without them, one becomes a perpetual victim.

Peers feared him as he not only had gang affiliation, but he also pretended that rules did not apply to him. This person, who knew him because of governmental intervention when he became a truancy and behavioral problem in school, said that he operated violently because those were the ways and rules of the environments where he lived. In other words, his neighborhood life and institutional life taught criminality. He learned anti-social functioning from the places where he was. While he—and those like him—needs education, education credentials and job skills, what they often get is training in criminal activities and values. So it is that this respondent expressed an almost absolute distrust for, and belief in, incarceration as a deterrent or help for any—but especially for teens.

Focus Groups

Aforementioned worship services and culmination of the interviews/surveys moved towards focus groups. There were two attempts at these focus groups. These offered thought-provoking, fascinating moments. One of the groups gathered to discuss the circumstances of violence in the community and how to alleviate them and the

climate that fosters them. The other group was organized as a strategy group to review what happened in the special worship gatherings. It was also gathered to develop ways to address and curtail the violence of the neighborhood.

The former group gathered for the purpose of discussing the survey questions as a group. This meeting quickly devolved into a conversation over what was being done, who could get things done and where the financial resources were to curtail or end violence. Several persons in this group not only knew about the violence in the community but lost persons they knew well. Perhaps the most vocal person in the group was a person who lost a son to gun violence approximately ten years prior to the meeting and had a nephew who was murdered a mere two weeks before this meeting.

These facts heightened emotions relative to this issue. Further, as a community worker who specializes in diffusing conflict—and thus violence—in gangs, the organization that this person leads consistently struggles for financial resources. Watching others receive much more funding, while viewing them as much less effective, these views and emotions became a part of the conversation, and thus made for a struggle in hearing, much less formulating possible solutions.¹⁰ However, this encounter also illustrated the challenges of these issues. The person who was most expressive was a sex worker early in life, fundamentally because of the lack of income in that period of her life.

This experience was essential in the work she came to do in this and other communities. She labors in the city to assist sex workers to leave that life. She moves across the southern part of the nation to change laws in sex trafficking and to eliminate gang violence. Because of this work and the experience of not accessing resources for

¹⁰ Keith Caldwell Interview, Ministerial Intern, Gordon Memorial Church.

present work, this person found much to be suspicious of and to be angry about.

Simultaneously there was the hope—in a meeting that never was called or advertised as a fund raising or fund development event—there might be access to resources that would help in this needed work.¹¹ This group time transformed to a hearing about obstructions to and assessments about community involvement. The limitations of funding, the power of poverty, the devaluing of lives, the contributions of churches or lack thereof, the extinction of some organizations and the discontent of young people were all mentioned.

This meeting also recalled the “I Have a Future” organization. This program operated for several years and is viewed as having made a significant contribution to education and poverty problems. Youngsters met weekly with the executive director and volunteers. Annual trips to colleges and universities gave exposure beyond the neighborhood, especially to HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Funded by outside grantors, the program ended when resources dried up. However, this group was excited about considering an event like this to build and develop transformative responses to issues and challenges.

It was noted here that collaboration and partnerships would be essential at several levels. First, there would be the need for volunteers who were committed to a long-term presence. The issues of this community are systemic in nature. They are rooted in lack: 1) lack of money; 2) lack of education; 3) lack of credentials; 4) lack of self-esteem; 5) lack of community ownership and the pride that comes with it; 6) lack of belief in self and community agency, that is, that one can have a positive impact on what happens around one.

¹¹ Caldwell Interview.

Another group met to discuss the celebrations of worship and communion. This group discussed the impact of the worship and communion times. The group began by saying that this was, to their knowledge, the first time a place for discussing this kind of hurt and pain had occurred for them. There had never been place or space to discuss the grief, to lament the pain. Having a context in which to verbalize the pain with compassionate and kind people was mentioned as important. Memories of all sorts came to the fore because of the opportunity.

While it was important to have this opportunity, the pain was still very real and showed up at these services and communion. Persons wanted to move forward, wanted to forgive and to show resilience. This was important to continue—and in some cases begin—the process of healing and moving forward. Pain could have alternatives. The solutions might be found amongst people willing to address the issue as the church. When discussion moved towards addressing the issue of what appears to be systemic violence, an initial comment was that the idea of tackling the issue seemed overwhelming. Another comment was that, while knowing there was a need to assess impact on families, children and parents, this multifaceted issue of violence was quite large to address.

It was noted that there are some cultural conditions that must be recognized and overcome. Among these: the devaluing of Black bodies and lives; the sense of race hatred and despising that limits or eliminates positive expectations within the Black population; the notion of “American exceptionalism” which is the idea that the United States of America differs qualitatively from others and that this difference is not a part of this community.

It was following this conversation about social situations that several possibilities for response ideas emerged. First, there was the suggestion to see what other churches, organizations and people are doing. What were schools doing? Another recommendation was to support persons in stages or places of natural grief and traumatic grief. This was offering an assessment to determine the needs of those who mourned. By so doing, it would be possible to provide appropriate linkages and coordination of services such as individual counseling, group counseling and/or grief education. This led to the discussion of beginning grief groups, parenting groups and support groups. Some believed that responses were present but dormant in the life of the church. A Young Gentlemen's Ministry, begun through the GMUMC United Methodist men, was viewed as a possibility for curbing lethal aggression. The individuation that boys received through mentors, such as the simple act of wearing blazers on certain days, was viewed as a possibility for change. With this came the idea of a Young Ladies' Club connected and mimicking similar school groups.

Conclusion

These focus groups, media stories and one-on-one interviews gave project insight into the depth and immensity of the social issues that literally torment the neighborhood. Financial incapacity and the absence of tools to advance in the society poisons the environment. It causes the context to be one of survival. This subsistence mindset impacts community values, morals and ethics. Being certain that survival occurs, by whatever means it can happen, drives a kind of despair, an ethical relativism that justifies any and all behaviors that help to meet basic needs. When this becomes a community's

norm, the qualitative research of this project suggests that the community can be expected to exhibit aggressive and brutal behaviors. The missional congregation, then, accepts a serious worship challenge when, because of the call of Jesus, it attempts to fuel transformative action by way of its worship experience.

The project focuses on showing that intentional worship can have change-making, even revolutionary impact upon issues that unfavorably influence its community. GMUMC has been a part of such ministry before, during the civil rights era. With a new era—but a similar commitment to Jesus Christ and a similar outlook—a revived sense of holistic salvation can occur. Because the times and issues are different, the results cannot be assumed to look the same; however, they can be quite alike. New hope, for individuals, households and neighborhoods can be the outcome. A new way of being can cause people to have new ways of doing and of living. This new way of being will be neither easy nor immediate. Still, there can be change. It is because of this faith that results, summary, and conclusions shall be drawn.

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTIONS, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Through the research on this project I encountered several learnings. First, poverty impacts the ills of this neighborhood in mammoth ways. It motivates, and in many ways determines, the violence of this neighborhood. The actuality of scarcity, not because of desire but because of needs, instigates behaviors and beliefs that many in other income strata can hardly imagine. That many Nashville citizens live in abject paucity defies the imagination of many. As such, many cannot understand the hostility—latent or obvious—that is found in particular neighborhoods. What the larger society defines as a culture of crime and viciousness finds its roots in lack—lack of adequate shelter, lack of clothing, lack of food, and lack of positive life options. While the median income for Tennessee households was \$41,693 per year and was \$113,696 in the prestigious 37027 in 2011, the GMUMC zip code—37208—posted a median income of \$22,679 for the same year.¹ The median income across the state virtually doubles the median income in the GMUMC community. Persons who despair this way are assuredly more likely to live in suspicion, anger and hostility. When basic needs are consistently

¹ 37208 Zip Code Detailed Profile and 37027 Zip Code Detailed Profile, city-data.com, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://www.city-data.com/zips/37208.html>, <http://www.city-data.com/zips/37027.html>.

threatened, the stress to behave in survivalist fashion is heightened. I discovered the fear, pain and hostility fostered by poverty in ways I had not seen before.

Secondly, I learned that education issues connect very closely to poverty and violence. The inability to read shuts off opportunities at even the most meager level. Illiteracy in this society, with its myriad books and documents in paper and electronic form, is a recipe for perceived failure and a consequent lack of self-esteem. This self-esteem issue can show itself in one of two ways according to Gregory Ellison. He writes,

Sociologist Christian Parenti aptly describes the dilemma faced by many ambitious African American young men seeking acknowledgment and striving for success. Referencing criminologist Steven Spitzer's article "Toward a Marxian Theory of Deviance" in *Lockdown America*, Parenti divides cast off populations into two categories "social junk" and "social dynamite." Social junk are people of feeble mind and body whose lives have deteriorated and whose spirits have shattered. . . . The other half of this "dispensable" population is "social dynamite." This group presents a greater challenge to the social order because it is unpredictable and volatile.²

Thus, those who feel forced to the margins can become either quietly depressed or stridently furious. The lack of credentialing keeps persons from qualifying for jobs, from fundamental authorizations that allow access to opportunities for beginning businesses and, thus, maintains an economic stranglehold. In an expanding city that boasts strong economic growth, the frustrations and angers fester. This lack of essentials forms obstructions that embitter persons until they predictably explode in violent forms. In addition, when persons have responded in criminal manners and are recorded in the justice system, these records taint their reputations. Documented as trouble-makers and criminals, a cycle of unemployment and underemployment exacerbates the problems of

² Gregory C. Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 14.

poverty and sub-par education. Records ensue for people who sold drugs or stole items as a means of survival. They exist in a context defined by economic insufficiency and inadequate schooling; survival responses become the problems that define their existence. I gathered how difficult the jobs of educators and families are because of the impoverished state of many. Formal education becomes a luxury that one can ill afford to seek because survival must be prioritized. This environment often values learning in different forms, distinct information and particular positions. The capacity to make money, to defend life, to be viewed as strong and to enforce these becomes paramount.

Disciples of Jesus, with a sense of mission and ministry as the church, reject the idea that any human beings are meant to be junk. That which has become junk can be salvaged in Jesus, made whole by God and perfected by Holy Spirit empowered love. With all its known capacity for destruction, dynamite can be used for empowering purposes. Dynamite can be liberated from the one-dimensional misperception as only volatile and terrible and redeemed to life giving purposes.

The challenge I found for the mission was to live this adage out in congregational/community ministry. People of faith are as susceptible to media portraits and social mores as any others. The sense that these issues were created by moral failing alone was rarely said; however, it was clearly felt. The sense that poverty and education can be overcome by grit and disciplined choices alone had—in interviews and in attitudes—an almost ubiquitous quality. It appeared to be everywhere. That it might be overcome, while often spoken, seems just about disbelieved. The feeling of pushing a rock uphill, with a piece of thread as the pushing tool, many times permeated the atmosphere.

Even with this, as I experienced celebrations of worship, the one-on-one interviews and the focus groups, I continued to sense—past the pain, doubts and fears—that God would show ways of movement that could indeed respond to the fundamental issues of poverty and poor education. As I spent time in these situations with parishioners and as GMUMC moved with me, we were invited into situations that I had not considered prior to this ministry experience.

Therefore, a third and further learning was how disconnected people and institutions can become. Again, the complexity of poverty and its prevalence seems either accepted as a fact of life or has become so normative that it is almost invisible. Within a mile of the Pearl Cohn High School there are at least seven churches and three colleges. Over seventy churches (four of which are United Methodist) can be found throughout the 37208 zip code. That poverty was a source of neighborhood problems seemed always to be apparent. The systemic nature of that poverty as a justice issue for institutions seemed much less clear. The relationships that could clarify this, that could move people of means and allow use of other institutions to make significant impact often were not there. I found that there is a socially accepted stance that poverty is about self-discipline and personal morality. That such a position and understanding camouflages systemic damage became much clearer for me in this project.

What Might Be Done Differently

By way of research and methods, using worship more often would be the primary focus were this to happen again. Intentionally inviting leaders of various institutions to attend these celebrations, to witness first-hand the laments and hopes of people and to

have them interact would be a step towards community health and wholeness. The project demonstrates the crucial nature of nourishing relationships through the adoration of God and the self-giving example of Jesus Christ.

Because GMUMC served as the site for these three funerals, and because of the immense pain church and community members described, the three worship celebrations described in chapter five transformed into a monthly healing celebration. Congregational healing emerged as a critical spiritual need, along with community healing. GMUMC's Centering (spiritual disciplines) ministry took note of the need, prayed for it and has led it since late winter of 2013. This healing service—with anointing oil and communion—has offered a place for lament, for sharing of hurt and injury, with Jesus as the focus for wholeness. In addition to two regular prayer times during the week, this monthly celebration of worship continues to offer hope and possibility for those who live with various worries, pains and maladies. The spiritual dimensions of this healing time—healing the church into a position of relevance for the issues of the day—can hardly be quantified but certainly cannot be dismissed because it is essential to the work and ministry that continues to develop. The power of God accesses resources from places that had not been considered, known, or recalled.

Some of these resources began to be evident almost immediately after engaging the funeral of Johnathan Johnson. Congregations and community organizations began meeting to address the violence plaguing the community. GMUMC received particular invitations—despite a brand new pastor, virtually unknown to the community—because of hosting the three funerals. Especially moved by the Johnson murder, one of the prominent local church pastors in the community called clergy together with members of

several community organizations to discuss how to address the issue. At this meeting, leaders from the Children's Defense and from the Metropolitan School district offices presented options for church consideration relative to this issue.

These leaders discussed two particular opportunities for community action and intervention: Family Suppers and the Children's Sabbath. Gordon accepted the invitation to host the August 2013-14 school-year Family Supper and training. This event was led by three organizations: Metro Nashville Schools, CDF and Gideon's Army. This meeting introduced the idea of Family Suppers to the community as a series of events aimed at celebrating and encouraging children. The suppers are times for listening for the needs, desires and issues from the perspective of the community. The events also promote strategic and tactical tools for community empowerment towards the successful educating of children and youth.

Further, CDF led its multi-faith Children's Sabbath observance with Metro Nashville Public Schools, partnering with Gideon's Army, the Urban League of Middle Tennessee, Black Nashville Pastors, a representative to the Tennessee General Assembly and Rep. Harold Love, Jr., and Nashville Interdenominational Ministerial Fellowship. This city-wide collaboration followed the CDF theme for the year, "Beating Swords into Plowshares: Ending the Violence of Guns and Child Poverty." Faith communities from varied religions and sects joined in a shared concern for children and a mutual obligation to improving the conditions in which they live. The theme guided preaching and messages offered across the city. Gordon participated fully in this Sabbath observance.

When GMUMC began its worship celebrations focused on transformative responses to this violence, a CDF representative and leader attended the first worship

service. At the first celebration, persons heard and witnessed community leaders who spoke to solutions, inviting the church to take the sanctuary to the streets. While all of these leaders did not remain for communion, they offered commending remarks about the work GMUMC was beginning. As well as cooperation in other events, partnering with others in the community positioned GMUMC to be considered and chosen as a CDF Freedom School site. CDF leaders initiated the conversation as they had been with GMUMC in several of the community proceedings that sought change. They introduced the Freedom School this idea as a means of offering long terms solutions to bring about change in this neighborhood and community.

The Freedom School idea began in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, 1964. The Children's Defense Fund grew out of the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Marian Wright Edelman. The first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, Mrs. Edelman directed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi, worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as counsel for his Poor People's Campaign, and dedicated her early career to defending the civil liberties of people struggling to overcome poverty and discrimination. In 1969, Mrs. Edelman began the Washington Research Project, a public interest law firm that monitored federal programs for low-income families and, out of that initiative, she founded the Children's Defense Fund in 1973.³ Edelman leads CDF to, among other things, seek a Freedom School movement that includes Nashville.

³ Children's Defense Fund, "Our History," Children's Defense Fund, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.childrensdefense.org/about-us/our-history>.

CDF leaders, who had participated in the initial worship celebration and had been lead presenters in several community events, approached the pastor to request that GMUMC host a Freedom School. A meeting was held to determine what this would entail as GMUMC experiences considerable financial challenge. GMUMC assets included: over 40,000 square feet of space, most of which was unoccupied during the average work week; a Summer Enrichment program that no longer operated such that there was no competing ministry effort; proximity to Meharry Medical College, Fisk and TSU; several Vanderbilt divinity students who helped to extend entree to staff, faculty and other students; two vehicles for transportation.

GMUMC had access to educational methods and personnel; the church simply had no money to offer. Sixty thousand dollars were needed. Still, the CDF/Gordon team believed this transformative ministry could happen and prayerfully began to work at it. With strong contacts by the team, the \$60,000.00 was raised. This program registered forty-six total youth and, over six weeks, began to show transformation and change in their lives.

GMUMC Freedom School staff perceived and shared several points of positive impact for the registered youth. First of all, they observed increased reading proficiency. The team saw a majority of children improve ability to recognize words, read them, and understand what they were reading. In other words, identification and comprehension progressed. Further, the typical loss of reading skills, found in children of similar socio-economic status, did not happen with this group of children.

Qualitatively, staff members commented that children improved their self-confidence or self-definition. Attitude and behavioral changes became quite evident.

Politeness and manners grew customary over the six weeks. Children spoke positively about what they were doing and about what could be done. The scholars demonstrated progressing responsibilities for the Freedom School environment. Upon entry, they needed to be reminded to pick up after themselves, to be respectful of others and to accord politeness to all. By the end of the six-week term neatness and niceness had become routine among the scholars. Artistic abilities blossomed among many students.

Staff members say that the students were confident in the lyrics of songs and art they rendered for the closing showcase. They also became more self-assured relative to the spoken and written word. The children demonstrated sureness in their abilities to verbally articulate and to demonstrate literary proficiency. They developed confidence in discussing facts and characters from American Black History. They learned of persons who could only be read about and they met history-making figures. One of those they met was Ernest ‘Rip’ Patton, an actual Freedom Rider who serves as a member of GMUMC.

During the time of this Freedom School, Gordon also served as host for a Community Candidate’s forum. Held on Sunday, July 13, 2014, this assembly consisted of a time to meet and greet candidates, an opportunity for persons with criminal records to have those records expunged, and voter registration. The bulk of this meeting was for hearing from candidates and a “teach-in”—a time for understanding issues and concerns in the upcoming primary and general elections. Candidates for judge, mayor, city council, and other such offices appeared, offered speeches, and fielded questions from attendees. This cross-racial and cross-cultural event saw more than 400 persons gathered. Partnering with Urban Epicenter, New Covenant Christian Church and other organizations made this a noteworthy and substantial event, one that showed GMUMC as a church open to the

community on many levels. This was one of two primary elections that saw history making turnouts for the Nashville area, particularly for the Black community.

A budding relationship with the neighborhood high school, Pearl Cohn, began as well. The stellar work that school officials led subsequent to the murder of Johnathan Johnson received recognition by the church through a Gordon community award.

Because this school is an entertainment magnet school, and because of its location in the area and its service to the families of 37208 zip-code area, the issues and concerns of this high school differ markedly from those at the Martin Luther King, a magnet high school situated one mile away but serving a much more exclusive and higher income bracket.⁴

Gordon fed an athletic team, assisted in game transportation and remained in consistent contact with the school through its community liaisons and other volunteers. Plans continue to develop for mentoring and tutoring relationships. This collaboration will prove essential to future programming and ministerial efforts as the church seeks to impact those who, while older, still have a chance to become all that God wants them to be.

All of this indicates that with more celebration and focused intent on partnering through these times, other resources may be brought to bear on these issues and concerns. God showed what could happen when persons saw and heard about a congregation's missional efforts. I would seek to be more intentional and to be more relational in this regard if I were to do this again.

⁴ See Appendix C for comparison of the Martin Luther King Magnet and Pearl Cohn Entertainment Magnet schools, their clientele and their income levels. Ironically, MLK High School location is the Pearl High School building of the segregation era.

Conclusions

The project is about how a movement from worship celebration to transforming worship service can happen, calling attention to the community, to its concerns, and its needs. Responsiveness to these by the missional church brings integrity and relevance. Covenantal sensitivity, rooted and nurtured in word and table, frees the church for hearing and responding innovatively. Making room in worship for lamentation, offered occasion to see what persons had experienced. The liturgies, simple and plain allowed for confessing of hurt, pain and need. Assurances to these confessions came in the fellowship of the meal, the time of communion to build a fellowship and community. These pledges about God's presence were not the kinds that sometimes declare troubles are solved in a moment; rather, they offered a chance at hope in the real life situation of grief and hurt over death. These times, liturgies, and communion moments did, however, foster relationships and connections that would later assist in new responses to these issues, hurts and pains.

Future research could focus on ways to reorient media reports on the neighborhood. News accounts gave a well-defined sense of how this community's issues were seen and what the broadcast and print journalists viewed as important information for the public. This was essential as it made me see that deeper queries needed to be made. By interview and survey, a sense of the impact of poverty, poor education and mis-education became clearer. An answer to the question of how to address this issues did not happen immediately, but some ideas, some plans, and some God gifts showed up. The Freedom School, the Candidates Forum and the planned Reclamation Center were all God responses to this. That media might be a cooperative entity and tool for making

change is an essential concern. With social media now also dominating the information landscape, there is much to be gleaned towards this kind of transformative work.

Further research could also focus on how partnerships between schools and churches can influence poverty and education issues. Communities beset by educational disparities need churches that will open their doors to address difficult ministry. Funerals became the GMUMC gateway; however, partnerships with local schools offer a clear path to educational staffs, children and guardians/parents. Relationships with organizations like the Children's Defense Fund, Alliance for Families and Children, universities and other organizations can assist in finding solutions and while young people yet live. Research into what other partnerships might offer would be important. Clues to living conditions, subsistence concerns, and even survival needs can show up in schools. More connections with government agencies and officials gives access to resources that the church may not be able to acquire on its own but that can come because of nonsectarian purposes that benefit citizens.

Final and Personal Thoughts

This project blessed my ministry in allowing me to see anew what God can do in a worshipping community. Congregational focus and reflection on the mission of the church—biblically, historically and theologically—can and should be essential to mission minded ministry. In Romans, Paul's admonition to a living worship directs a liturgical freedom for disciples of Jesus. The transformed mind he invites can make for the kind of commitment necessary to act for change. The psalm reminds that God receives blessing when God's people engage in a lifestyle of overcoming. As well, the history of the

church and the history of GMUMC demonstrate change-making ministry because of encounters with God. God shows up when God is intentionally sought for mission. This is an experience that can be much more regular as we contemplate what God has done in our ecclesial past. Finally, knowing and expecting God's emancipatory work in Jesus, makes theology relevant and practical. Freeing people from personal and social ills, expecting them to live in God's abundant purpose for their lives-lives of worship and praise is the critical mindset that must happen for transformation to occur. The expectation that transformation can and will occur in Jesus makes this ministry exciting in new ways. Thanks and praise to the Almighty God for this.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Interview Questions for Participants

1. How is it that violence seems so prevalent here?
2. How do you feel about your loss today?
3. How has your loss impacted/disrupted your life?
4. How have you been called to help your family members since this loss?
5. What reasons might there have been to expect this?
6. How have you tried to understand this loss in your life?
7. Have you ever thought you could have somehow prevented this?
8. What makes such violence prevalent in our community?
9. How many more families do you believe have to confront such a tragic loss?
10. What people, organizations, institutions have been supportive? How?
11. What might people, organizations, institution have done, or could they do, better in circumstances like these?
12. What message do you have to others who have experienced a similar loss?

APPENDIX B

COMPARISON OF DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS BRENTWOOD AND NORTH NASHVILLE AREAS OF METRO NASHVILLE

Comparison of Demographic Factors North Nashville 37208 and Brentwood 37027

<p>For population 25 years and over in 37208:</p> <p>High school or higher: 74.4% Bachelor's degree or higher: 16.5% Graduate or professional degree: 6.5% Unemployed: 18.5% Mean work commute time: 20.9 minutes</p>	<p>For population 25 years and over in 37027:</p> <p>High school or higher: 97.8% Bachelor's degree or higher: 66.6% Graduate or professional degree: 25.8% Unemployed: 4.2% Mean work commute time: 20.9 minutes</p>
<p>For population 15 years and over in 37208:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never married: 54.5% • Now married: 20.8% • Separated: 5.0% • Widowed: 7.0% • Divorced: 12.7% 	<p>For population 15 years and over in 37027:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never married: 19.2% • Now married: 70.2% • Separated: 0.5% • Widowed: 3.4% • Divorced: 6.7%
<p>Zip code 37208 compared to state average:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Median household income below state average. • Unemployed percentage above state average. • Black race population percentage significantly above state average. • Hispanic race population percentage significantly below state average. • Median age below state average. • Foreign-born population percentage significantly below state average. • Renting percentage above state average. • Number of rooms per house below state average. • House age above state average. • Number of college students above state average. • Percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher below state average. 	<p>Zip code 37027 compared to state average:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Median household income significantly above state average. • Median house value significantly above state average. • Unemployed percentage below state average. • Black race population percentage significantly below state average. • Hispanic race population percentage below state average. • Foreign-born population percentage above state average. • Renting percentage significantly below state average. • Length of stay since moving in below state average. • Number of rooms per house significantly above state average. • House age below state average. • Percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher significantly above state average.

APPENDIX C

**US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT COMPARISON OF PEARL COHN (37208) AND
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR MAGNET AT PEARL SCHOOLS (37203)**

US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT COMPARISON OF PEARL COHN (37208) AND
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR MAGNET SCHOOLS (37203)

A. PEARL COHN	MARTIN LUTHER KING																				
<p>Economically Disadvantaged Students These are the percentages of the school's students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, based on data reported to the government.</p> <table> <tr> <td>Free Lunch Program (% of total)</td><td>77%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Reduced-Price Lunch Program (% of total)</td><td>4%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Total Economically Disadvantaged (% of total)</td><td>81%</td></tr> </table>	Free Lunch Program (% of total)	77%	Reduced-Price Lunch Program (% of total)	4%	Total Economically Disadvantaged (% of total)	81%	<p>Economically Disadvantaged Students These are the percentages of the school's students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, based on data reported to the government.</p> <table> <tr> <td>Free Lunch Program (% of total)</td><td>21%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Reduced-Price Lunch Program (% of total)</td><td>7%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Total Economically Disadvantaged (% of total)</td><td>27%</td></tr> </table>	Free Lunch Program (% of total)	21%	Reduced-Price Lunch Program (% of total)	7%	Total Economically Disadvantaged (% of total)	27%								
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Total Economically Disadvantaged (% of total)	27%																				
<p>English Proficiency Distribution English proficiency is determined by student results on the school's Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test.</p> <table> <tr> <td>Total Students Tested</td><td>257</td></tr> <tr> <td>Below Basic</td><td>26%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Basic</td><td>42%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Proficient</td><td>32%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Advanced</td><td>0.4%</td></tr> </table>	Total Students Tested	257	Below Basic	26%	Basic	42%	Proficient	32%	Advanced	0.4%	<p>English Proficiency Distribution English proficiency is determined by student results on the school's Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test.</p> <table> <tr> <td>Total Students Tested</td><td>212</td></tr> <tr> <td>Below Basic</td><td>0%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Basic</td><td>1%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Proficient</td><td>61%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Advanced</td><td>38%</td></tr> </table>	Total Students Tested	212	Below Basic	0%	Basic	1%	Proficient	61%	Advanced	38%
Total Students Tested	257																				
Below Basic	26%																				
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<p>Algebra Proficiency Distribution Algebra proficiency is determined by student results on the school's Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test.</p> <table> <tr> <td>Total Students Tested</td><td>216</td></tr> <tr> <td>Below Basic</td><td>38%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Basic</td><td>31%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Proficient</td><td>18%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Advanced</td><td>13%</td></tr> </table>	Total Students Tested	216	Below Basic	38%	Basic	31%	Proficient	18%	Advanced	13%	<p>Algebra Proficiency Distribution Algebra proficiency is determined by student results on the school's Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test.</p> <table> <tr> <td>Total Students Tested</td><td>155</td></tr> <tr> <td>Below Basic</td><td>0%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Basic</td><td>0%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Proficient</td><td>6%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Advanced</td><td>94%</td></tr> </table>	Total Students Tested	155	Below Basic	0%	Basic	0%	Proficient	6%	Advanced	94%
Total Students Tested	216																				
Below Basic	38%																				
Basic	31%																				
Proficient	18%																				
Advanced	13%																				
Total Students Tested	155																				
Below Basic	0%																				
Basic	0%																				
Proficient	6%																				
Advanced	94%																				
<p>Overall Student Performance This measures overall student performance on state exams. The calculations by U.S. News were the first of two steps in determining which schools received at least a bronze medal.</p> <table> <tr> <td>State Test Performance Index</td><td>38.6</td></tr> </table>	State Test Performance Index	38.6	<p>Overall Student Performance This measures overall student performance on state exams. The calculations by U.S. News were the first of two steps in determining which schools received at least a bronze medal.</p> <table> <tr> <td>State Test Performance Index</td><td>123.4</td></tr> </table>	State Test Performance Index	123.4																
State Test Performance Index	38.6																				
State Test Performance Index	123.4																				

Risk-Adjusted Performance Index Disadvantaged Student Performance This measures the proficiency on state exams among typically underperforming subgroups. The calculations by U.S. News were the second of two steps in determining which schools received at least a bronze medal.	-13.0	Risk-Adjusted Performance Index Disadvantaged Student Performance This measures the proficiency on state exams among typically underperforming subgroups. The calculations by U.S. News were the second of two steps in determining which schools received at least a bronze medal.	34.4
Percentage of Disadvantaged Students Who Are Proficient	18.2	Percentage of Disadvantaged Students Who Are Proficient	93.8
Percentage of Non- Disadvantaged Students Who Are Proficient	60.0	Percentage of Non- Disadvantaged Students Who Are Proficient	96.3
Gap Between Disadvantaged and Non-Disadvantaged Students	-41.8	Gap Between Disadvantaged and Non-Disadvantaged Students	-2.5
Gap Between School and State Among Disadvantaged Students	-18.3	Gap Between School and State Among Disadvantaged Students	57.3

APPENDIX D

WORSHIP OUTLINE FOR STOPPING THE VIOLENCE

Worship Outline for Stopping the Violence

Welcome

Prayer and Scripture Psalm 34:1 Romans 12:1-2 (3 min) (Biblical Foundation)

Songs of Praise

Occasion Witnesses

Soloist “Great is Thy Faithfulness” or like that

Word and/or Witnesses with these texts (Focus on Justice) and above texts 6:30-6:50

***Isaiah 1:17** Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.*

***Jeremiah 22:3** Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.*

***Proverbs 3: 9** Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

***Proverbs 31:8-9** Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

Invitation to Action

Dismissed to Communion (dinner)

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